Ongoing Professional Development for Busy Teacher Teams

by [Nicholas Bradley](#) and [Jason R. Walters](#)

Ongoing professional development (PD) for in-service teachers has traditionally involved attending seminars or listening to invited guest speaker experts with content often focused on theory and less on practice (Johnson, 2009). Though such opportunities can be valuable, they are typically infrequent and not specific to the day-to-day teaching contexts of teachers. More recent conceptualizations of effective PD aim to remedy this with Borg (2015), for example, suggesting that the following characteristics are required:

- relevance to the needs of teachers and students
- teacher involvement in content and process
- peer collaboration
- support from school leadership
- exploration of and reflection on practices and beliefs
- job-embeddedness
- contextual applicability
- critical engagement with received knowledge
- respect for teachers' knowledge and experience

With traditional PD requiring great organisation and expense, and contemporary notions involving long checklists, it may seem that implementing effective PD is no small task. Yet, this need not be the case. In this article, we share how to implement a PD system that was introduced within a team of busy teachers.

This PD system was introduced among a team of 18 full-time English teachers of multiple backgrounds (nationality, race, gender, age, home language), who teach for approximately 18 classroom hours per week. Teachers were based in two shared offices (nine teachers in each) with most working independently on their courses despite sharing a coordinated curriculum. A scheduled meeting time was mandated; however, without any leadership or guidelines, meetings were little more than short chats that rarely included issues of practice. This system can be easily reproduced in most educational situations.

Selecting Outcomes

Based on issues relating to the wider educational context and those discovered from attending the teachers' meetings (see Step 1 of Implementation), several desired outcomes for PD stood out. When implementing structured PD sessions, it's important to explicitly mention all of the desired outcomes to teachers; explicit mention of these areas in early meetings helps to create buy-in by presenting the value of the PD. Over time, this will likely become unnecessary because teachers will already recognize and accept the value of sessions.

Following are the objectives we settled on for our context (see Table 1); your outcomes may differ, though we do recommend a strategic approach to selecting desired outcomes ahead of time. For us, this approach began with identifying the teachers' needs by maintaining an open-door policy, soliciting feedback, and ensuring opportunities for discussion. After gathering this input, we were able to consider the teachers' perspectives in terms of their interpersonal dynamics as well as their alignment with the broader mission of the school and the department, which in turn helped us to identify gaps and develop priorities for our intended.

Table 1. Objectives

Classroom Practice and Course Direction	To encourage reflection To gain the insights of others on past and future plans To expand teachers' toolkits To increase course cohesion and consistency
Collaboration and Mutual Respect	To become aware of and acknowledge the abilities of others To provide a forum in which to demonstrate skills To identify teachers with similar interests To increase collaboration and collegiality
Engagement with the Professional Community and Career Progression	To instill confidence to actively engage in educational conferences, associations, etc. To allow teachers to better articulate their practice and approach To inform teachers of opportunities to develop and advance their professional qualifications and credentials

A 4-Step Approach to Professional Development

This PD system utilizes a four-step approach. As you move through the steps, you'll identify strengths and needs, which will dictate your progression and changes.

1. **Fact-Finding and Structure Introduction**

The supervisor visits teachers' meetings, which allows them to identify elements of meetings that are productive and areas which need improvement or are absent. This stage can be considered a PD needs analysis. Introduce into meetings a simple structure in which teachers reflect on the past week of their shared classes and discuss plans for upcoming classes. If the supervisor can chair meetings, this is helpful.

2. Combining Meetings

Once a simple framework has been established and is familiar to teachers, reserve a larger room and combine the meetings of different teacher groups. Teachers now gain a wider range of perspectives and practices, as well as becoming more professionally aware of teachers in other offices, departments, or teams.

3. Introducing Explicit PD

Although discussion and reflection of practice in general represent PD, it's important to introduce a section to weekly meetings explicitly titled "PD." Each week, one teacher is responsible for leading a PD session for 30 minutes or more. Give teachers a broad brief to provide parameters for their PD sessions: The information provided should be relevant to the job they do, but the session can be structured as discussions, research presentations, conference reports, technology reviews, successful activities, and so on.

> " The majority of teachers reported a positive impact on their career progression due to this new PD structure. "

4. Self-Led Sessions

With teachers familiar with the structure of the meetings and explicit PD portion of the meeting, the supervisor steps back as chair/facilitator of the meetings and gives the role to two senior teachers within the group, who occupy it on a rotating basis.

Teacher Views on the Structured Professional Development

We conducted a survey among all participating teachers, past and present, and follow-up interviews with several teachers whose survey responses reflected a diverse range of perspectives.

Classroom Practice

Overall, 78.6% of respondents felt that the PD had a positive impact on their classroom practices, primarily by providing more variety in their activities and new ideas for their lessons. Interview comments also revealed largely positive experiences with many teachers praising the effectiveness of the PD in terms of collaboration and building a more cohesive language program. The results also highlighted the importance of PD in providing validation to teachers

and strengthening their belief in their own teaching practices and efficacy, evidenced in comments such as,

> One of the most positive effects…has been learning that most of my colleagues have/had similar issues with classroom management. As a result, it reassured me to know that it wasn't necessarily something that I was doing wrong, and…I could learn what others had been doing and try it in my own classrooms.

Professional Culture

The PD program was reported to have had an overwhelmingly positive effect on the team's professional culture, with over 92.8% reporting that it had a positive impact both on their professional relationships and on their level of recognition for their colleagues' abilities and talents. This heightened awareness of both self and others positively impacted the frequency and quality of collaboration (82.1%), idea-sharing (86%), and improved social relationships between colleagues (78.6%). As one teacher highlighted, the PD sessions were "informative about the type of teachers and researchers some of my colleagues are, and it has strengthened our professional relationship by collaborating or simply sharing ideas on the topic outside of the professional development sessions."

Involvement in the Academic Community and Career Growth

Though participants reported positive impact of PD on the team's professionalism, collaboration, and congeniality, the study also aimed to assess whether these benefits translated into improved professional opportunities. Survey results indicated increased involvement with the larger academic community and favourable perceptions of their career prospects, though feelings about the quality of academic output (e.g., research articles, conference presentations, and the like) did not significantly improve due to PD sessions. Nevertheless, teachers acknowledged that PD enhanced their presentation skills through additional practice opportunities and positively influenced their interest in conducting research and publishing. Comments such as "I used to see the field as out of my reach, but I now feel confident that I have a place and can do it as much as anyone else," and "The PDs helped me prepare for events and they offered a place to share what I learned from conferences and workshops. Most of my writing improved through writing, not the PD," indicate that PD generates interest in these endeavours but may not necessarily improve the final products.

Ultimately, the majority of teachers (85.2%) reported a positive impact on their career progression due to this new PD structure, with most experiencing at least a "slightly positive" impact. Additionally, 77.7% of teachers reported increased job satisfaction, which can lead to a much desired positive feedback loop in the professional culture of the group.

Final Word

The success of the PD sessions in achieving set objectives was clearly demonstrated in teacher surveys and interviews, and it was also present in multiple anecdotal ways, from the more frequent rate of teacher publication within university journals to the noticeable increase in a

positive and supportive atmosphere on campus. If you implement this structured PD within your own teaching team, the successes you'll see won't occur overnight, but will be the result of a process that involves a person of authority implementing a framework and actively participating within it until its value becomes clearly evident to the teachers. The success of the PD sessions created the desired feedback effect within our group, with some teachers continuing the momentum it generated and establishing their own conference and journal, which further contributes to the culture of professional growth. Positivity breeds positivity.

In the early stages, "selling" the value of the sessions to teachers to create buy-in is as important as the framework itself, which allows teachers to put forward their best selves within it. Once teachers embrace the value to their classes, their work environment, and their careers as educators, multiple follow-up options become possible.

References

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