



# A feasible approach to maximize professional development opportunities

Mary van der Heijden and Marianne Yong-Macdonald describe how they supported educators in their professional learning

Imagine yourself sitting in a room learning all about painting landscapes, watching videos and discussing strategies. How likely is it that you will be able to paint a landscape masterpiece the next day if you have only ever painted still life? Similarly, even for the most experienced teacher, implementing new

skills is far more challenging than learning about them. On average, it takes about 20 individual practices for a teacher to master a skill, and the number increases as the complexity of the skill increases (Joyce & Showers, 2002). In fact, it is often suggested that one-off workshops are ineffective because

they do not support teachers during the implementation stage where the learning curve is the steepest. We now know that such workshops have little or no positive impact on student achievement, and are ineffective in transforming practice (Yoon *et al*, 2007; Darling-Hammond *et al*, 2017), especially if the workshops are not specific enough or sustained enough to change classroom culture and teacher behaviours (Fullan, 2007).

Darling-Hammond *et al*, in a 2017 study, conducted on effective professional development for teachers, defined effective professional development as 'structured professional learning that results in changes to teacher knowledge and practices, and improvements in student learning outcomes'. Findings from this study suggest that focused content, modelling of teaching strategies, support for collaboration, feedback and reflection, and being sustained over a long period of time are all important factors in making professional learning sustainable. Consequently, the chances are increased of seeing a transformation in the classroom culture and practices of the participating teachers.

How then can schools provide opportunities for professional development that is transformational, cost-effective and time-efficient for their teachers? As senior leaders, we have both been concerned by this phenomenon. The challenges we faced brought the opportunity for us to innovate a training model for groups of middle leaders and early years teachers in international schools. We found that by adapting the Kirkpatrick model, as well as incorporating the professional learning design principles (noted above) from the report of Darling-Hammond *et al* (2017), we appeared to improve the learning for our participants, leading to observed positive changes in their behaviours.

The Kirkpatrick model supports the idea that sustained training and evaluation are significant in achieving desired results from the training itself. Many trainers may have heard of the Kirkpatrick model, though relatively few consider or know how to push feasibly beyond Level 2, especially

in schools. If teachers attend off-campus workshops or workshops on campus led by external providers, the teachers may lack the much-needed ongoing support to be able to implement new skills effectively, and/or shift behaviours and mindsets. In addition, schools may find it a challenge to provide the kind of support needed due to lack of resources, especially in terms of time and expertise. Concerned with the notion of how to move teachers to Level 2 and beyond, we decided that the most appropriate approach for us to take was to incorporate the following opportunities:

- A combination of individual and collaborative sessions
- Support from an external expert (remotely) on content
- Follow up coaching sessions externally (remotely) and internally face to face by the in-school lead of the initiative

This flexible approach meant that teachers were given input and had time to internalise new knowledge and embed skills through reflection. To maximise the learning, a key element of our approach was the use of coaching, with teams, groups and individuals. The design for this was simply two-fold: external input at strategic points (not just a one-off workshop), combined with internal support, where coaching and collaboration played a key role. Fortunately, the use of coaching in educational settings around the world has flourished in recent years and there is growing agreement that it can have a transformative effect on teachers and indeed on leaders. The training itself (external input) incorporated Darling-Hammond *et al*'s (2017) factors for effective professional development; for example the use of focused content, modeling strategies, and collaborative opportunities. However, the aspect we found most effective in working towards sustainable outcomes was providing opportunities for planning and reflection through cycles of individual coaching sessions linked to key learnings from the training.



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For us, remote coaching was most feasible for the schools in terms of expertise, cost and time to go beyond Level 2 of Kirkpatrick's model. Taking the knowledge gained in the training, practising new skills in the classroom and/or with teams, and reflecting on and sharing what success looks like empowered teachers to make informed decisions. Furthermore, our coachees showed a change in their behaviours and mindsets. Our combined model of focused, intermittent training supported by coaching at strategic intervals has shown promising results in maximising professional development opportunities. We recognise the value of one-off training events, but have strategically sought a further enhancement of these opportunities. Andy Buck (2018) supports Goleman's notion that whilst there are short-term benefits to training, more time and focus should be spent on reflecting and on what he calls 'self-directed learning'. Through our approach, a bridge between Level 2 and Level 3 was created, not only for one or two people that the school could afford to send to a one-off workshop. Instead a cost-effective, timely professional learning opportunity was provided for all, where aspects could be tried and tested 'on the job' while coaching maximised and extended the period of learning over time.

Now back to painting that landscape ...

#### References

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