



Helping Teachers Develop Formative Assessment Strategies

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INTRODUCTION

The Assessment to Learn (AtoL) contract is an in-depth professional development initiative funded by the Ministry of Education designed to improve and develop the knowledge, skills and confidence of teachers in the use of formative assessment strategies in order to more effectively help those students who are not achieving to their potential (Black & William, 1998). Effective professional development programmes and their sustainability has been an ongoing issue in New Zealand schools and the AtoL initiative is no exception.

In this paper, I give a facilitator's view of the changes made to one school's AtoL professional development programme over several years. The school is now in the third year of the AtoL development.

YEAR ONE

In the first year the development approach was based around the concept of individual teachers constructing their own knowledge leading to deeper understandings of how their practice impacted on student learning. Brookfield (1995: 251) suggests that when you want to change people's understandings, knowledge and practice you should not try to convince them intellectually, but instead should get them into a situation where they will have to act on ideas rather than argue about them. Therefore, the development model was about teachers constructing new knowledge gained through using new information, applying it in real situations, thinking critically about what is happening as a result, and then understanding why these things happen (Potter, 2004). With the support of the facilitator, teachers were encouraged to use an iterative approach to change based on an action research model involving: planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Cardno, 2003). The evaluation of the professional development programme involved using teacher self-evaluation tools developed by the Massey University AtoL team and interviews with children.

On reflection and analysis of the professional development evaluation at the end of the first year, the management team (principal and AP) along with the facilitator decided that the development programme had not succeeded. While a few teachers had changed their practice and student achievement was enhanced, most teachers had not changed their practice significantly. This may arguably in part be due to what Kanuka (2002) describes as teachers preferring surface learning and not wanting to do the hard intellectual labour needed for deep learning. Another negative impact, however, was the lack of facilitator time

to support teachers' deep learning. A different development approach was clearly needed.

YEAR TWO

Timperley (2004) suggests that only through strong professional learning communities can effective and sustained professional learning be enhanced. Bowring-Carr and West-Burnham (1999) provide a definition of learning communities as, 'one in which everyone and all structures are dedicated to learning' (p. 5). It was clear from the evaluation of the development that this was not the case for most teachers. Research on the impact of professional development programmes concluded that 'where significant change is sought, it may be wiser to involve fewer teachers than produce less significant change among many' (Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005: 17). Southworth (1998: also highlights the importance of leadership in primary schools – 'Leadership is not the prerogative of one person, it is a collaborative and corporate act' (p. 133). Based on these ideas a new approach was established.

Professional development in the second year would attempt to weave together changing and building teacher pedagogy and best practice, leadership capacity, and a school culture of continuous learning. Although, the action research model from the previous year would still be in place for individual teachers, a lead team would be established which would receive intensive support in creating 'best practice' as well as development opportunities to build and support the idea of a learning community. Since research also indicates that teachers' understanding of content has a positive impact on student learning outcomes (Ingvarson, 2005), another adviser was invited to work alongside the facilitator to provide specialist curriculum knowledge and pedagogy.

Once lead teachers had developed deeper understandings of how they impacted on student learning we wanted them to have the capacity to scale up what they had learned in order to spread the learning across the rest of the school. Coburn (2003) notes that scaling up change initiatives involves four components.

1. Depth (deep understanding of content and pedagogy);
2. Spread (school wide);
3. Ownership (teachers valuing and taking responsibility for their learning); and
4. Sustainability (continued support and reform).

Evaluation of the development work in the school would be based on Gusky's (2002) five levels of professional development evaluation: participants' reactions; participants' learning; organization support and change; participants' use of new knowledge and skills; and student learning outcomes. Analysis of the development at the end of the second year revealed that the new approach impacted positively on teacher efficacy, and student achievement. Features of a 'learning community' where all members wish to participate in the learning process as part of their own development, were also established – for example, Quality Learning Circles – where small groups of teachers are brought together to develop their professional practice (Stewart & Prebble, 1993: 133 -134). But new questions also emerged: to what extent had the lead team spread the

knowledge, did teachers 'own' the change, and how would the lead team continue to build on new learning and sustain changes?

YEAR THREE

Since sustaining the changed practice over time is a key objective of this project we expect the school, and in this case the leaders, to take responsibility for supporting ongoing professional development to teachers in formative assessment, content knowledge and pedagogy, inducting new teachers, and keeping up with new initiatives.

Although our data suggests the development was successful, informal conversations with teachers highlighted that the changes are fragile and a few teachers are still struggling to make changes at all. Research suggests that the acquisition and transfer of new knowledge and skills require a great deal of support (Dixon & Williams, 2003). Torrance and Pryor (in Dixon & Williams, 2003) go further to comment that despite teachers' commitment to making changes to their practice, without sustained support, change may not be evident. Lead team members in the school, although they were successful in building a strong knowledge base amongst themselves and spreading the learning through modelling and planning with other teachers, still needed to build their capacity to lead and contribute to a learning community in order for changes to be sustained.

There are three recurring characteristics in the research literature on sustainable in-service programmes. These are: teachers solving authentic problems; teacher learning as a social exercise; and teacher learning being spread or distributed across a community (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik & Soloway, 1998; Stewart & Prebble, 1993; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Stoll & Fink, 1995; Wilson & Berne, 1999). Consequently, it was decided that in the third year, four key components would be supported and built on in the revised professional development:

1. the opportunity to work with others to reflect on existing practices, to share and compare experiences, understandings, beliefs and practices and to contrast these with the research literature;
2. to engage in deep learning that involves critical thinking as learners construct new understanding, knowledge, meaning and practice;
3. leadership of the learning environment that supports deep learning, facilitates the social interactions of learning, and provides the content knowledge (Geddes, Graham, Potter, 2004); and
4. teachers use student achievement data to provide the focus for the above three components.

Along with this, a review of the 'lead teacher' model will take place to make sure it is not what O'Neill (2004) calls the 'Chinese whispers' approach to professional development – a linear top down approach where programme designers train facilitators and facilitators train lead teachers who then train other teachers. It may be timely to remind ourselves of a more interactive approach to leadership that moves staff closer to becoming a group of 'change facilitators' where each staff member plays a part in leading aspects of the

school by 'modelling the use of the new practices, disseminating information to other teachers, cheerleading and providing support' (Sergiovanni, 1991: 268).

The revised model of professional development will need to reflect the growing capacity in every teacher and provide opportunities for everyone to take a lead in some form. The lead team will need to focus on becoming reflective leaders – 'leadership involving being critically aware of what you are doing and why' (Southworth, 1998: 144) to identify gaps between existing conditions and desired realities, and seek effective and desirable ways to close the gaps (Ingvarson, 2005). The model will have to invite (Stoll & Fink, 1995) and motivate teachers to continue the reforms, ensure deep learning by all in a safe 'learning community', sustain practice, and measure and monitor the impact on student learning.

CONCLUSION

This revised model proposed takes aspects from several change models (Cardno, 2003; Gusky, 2002; Kotter, 1995; Lewin, 1948; Piggot-Irvine & Gratton, 2004; Stewart, 2000; Stewart & Prebble, 1993) all of which advocate a strong argument for using an action research approach to change management. The first step, creating a sense of urgency (Kotter, 1995), will be established through the lead team gathering data and critically reflecting on: the development so far; the impact on teacher practice and student achievement; and teacher/student/community perceptions of the changes including the lead team development. Data will be gathered using attitudinal surveys (Shaha, Lewis, O'Donnell, & Brown, 2004), self-assessment AtoL matrices and analysis of student achievement data. Through analysis and critique of the data (Stewart, 2000), gaps and issues may be highlighted thus providing the motivation needed for continued change and sustainability (Kotter, 1995). The issues and problems that are of immediate concern to practitioners (Stewart & Prebble, 1993: 75) will form the focus for the next phase which will be managed through the systematic approach of using repeated cycles of planning, action, observing, and reflecting (Lewin, 1948).

The challenge will be to ensure that all teachers are engaged in deep learning and contribute to a learning community in which teachers take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting approach toward both the mysteries and the problems of teaching and learning (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). The lead team will need to think carefully about how to balance the tension between facilitating deep, active learning and continued growth of the learning community, and the learners' expectations that they are passive receivers of information (Kanuka 2002). The challenge for the facilitator will be to encourage the habit of data gathering (Stewart & Prebble, 1993) so that collaborative problem solving can occur. Finally, as Huinker and Freckmann (2004) observe, the importance of questioning to engage teacher reflection will require the facilitator to encourage well-structured questions to promote teacher engagement and 'at the elbow' (Ingvarson, *et al.*, 2005) follow up as needed.

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