

A FRAMEWORK FOR MAKING CRITICAL SENSE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

1. Making Sense of Professional Learning Needs.

Rationale

It is sensible to begin by working out how we come to know what we need to know, understand and do. I guess that this should be done on two levels. The first is institutional: the school or college. The second is the individual professional or small groups of professionals working together.

The professional learning needs of institutions are likely to be driven by target setting and the fulfillment of policy. Making sense of the needs of individuals and small groups of individuals, although they are not disconnected from institutional needs, is often a more dynamic process involving interpersonal skills; just like teaching in fact. We are now encountering, after more delay than government had bargained for, a noticeable change to how systematically we try to make sense of professional learning needs. We are learning what happens when national standards meet performance management. Add to that mix a wider and re-modelled workforce, extended schools and the need for schools to collaborate with each other and with colleges on the implementation of the 14-19 initiative and we have a lot of sense-making to undertake if the professional learning needs of individuals are not to be brushed aside in the rush to implement policy and reach targets.

There is pressure to simplify the process of making sense of professional learning needs and to link it very tightly to national targets, expectations and standards. In the interests of doing something better than this perhaps we might adopt the slogan, '**Thinking Professionals in Thinking Schools and Colleges**'. It might also be wise to remember that before policy can be formulated or our approach to its implementation decided upon we should have some idea of our underlying values. Expressing our professional learning needs without considering our values is to build without foundation. Or, maybe, to build upon the foundations laid by others according to their blueprint.

Action

The following needs analysis activity **Relating Professional Learning Needs to Professional Learning Outcomes** can be used for a whole institution or for an individual or a small group of individuals.

The complete activity might take 45 minutes, although customised and adapted to your own circumstances you may vary this. The activity is designed to help

you and colleagues to articulate your professional learning needs and the factors affecting them and also to gain an early idea of the kind of impact that might result from addressing them. I originally designed this activity in response to one of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) who threatened the University of Liverpool with failure in a two year long inspection of CPD accredited at masters level if we did not persuade school teachers that their professional learning needs had to be aligned with government policy. Instead of doing that this activity seeks to make sense of needs within a wider context, including policy. It satisfied the HMI and we passed the inspection.

- a) Make a simple list of what you consider to be your professional learning needs (reminder: this may be carried out as an activity for an institution, an individual or a group of individuals). The list could include any set of skills, knowledge, understanding, experience, qualification or career change. At this stage you need to be as free as possible to include what you like. You may be influenced by overall school or college plans, national standards, performance management, National Strategies, NCSL programmes in which you are participating, postgraduate professional development (PPD), the masters degree in teaching and learning (MTL) or the GTCE's Teacher Learning Academy (TLA); but allow your list to be really wide-ranging so that you begin to see if there might be potential relationships between different aspects of professional life. Do not confine yourself to what is easily measurable. In other words, you can include items relating to self-confidence, motivation and self-esteem.
- b) Now try to classify the items in your list by identifying their source. In other words, are they:
 - entirely personal (or, where applicable, institutional);
 - derived from institutional plans or policies;
 - in response to local government policy;
 - in response to central government policy;
 - representative of particular beliefs, concerns and values;
 - a combination of any of the above;
 - or derived from some other source?
- c) Next try to classify the items in your list in terms of timescale. It may help to see these as short-term (say, a few weeks); medium-term (say, a few months); long-term (say, a year or more); and continuous (these are the kinds of needs that never go away). There is, by the way, no compulsion to confine yourself to these definitions of the timescales. This activity is designed to support and not constrain you. When, however, you check over your list you should be able to see that some items can be achieved quickly. This may give you a psychological lift but, perhaps more importantly, it makes the point that sometimes professional learning is a natural process that can start at any time and also that sometimes the way

to achieve the longer term targets is to see how they relate to the shorter term ones.

- d) Now move on to consider what you expect to be the nature of the evidence for the impact of professional learning that might help you to demonstrate that you have met or addressed your needs. Before you do that, however, remember that not all evidence for the impact of professional learning will be tidy, targetted and tangible. If, for example, one of your identified needs was improved professional self-esteem, then the evidence may be somewhat intangible. Sometimes the only way that you can present such evidence is to write a convincing account of what it felt like to, say, lead for the first time a working party of colleagues and how this has led to a gain in professional confidence that has encouraged you to do more as a professional.
- e) So, the next step is to classify your Expected Evidence for the impact of professional learning as either Tangible or Intangible. This should help you to avoid any tendency to ignore any evidence that is not straightforward and solid. You are beginning to establish here what you consider to be the signals of success but do stay tentative lest you fall into the trap of only looking for evidence that fits what you want.
- f) The next stage in this activity is to consider the conditions controlling the generation of evidence for professional learning. In other words, although, for example, as an individual you may have identified as a professional learning need the spending of a great deal of money it is unusual for an individual to control much resource.
- g) It will help if you can record your completion of this activity. A useful table for setting this out would look like this, with as many rows as you require for each professional learning need.

Identified Professional Learning Need	Source of Need	Time-scale	Nature of Expected Evidence for Impact	Controlled by

[To see a worked example click here.](#)

Now that you have completed this analysis of professional learning needs you should be in a better position to decide upon a set of intended professional learning outcomes. But first you need to think about **contexts and baselines**.