

Professional Learning in Education in a Changing World

Observations on teachers' engagement in online elective professional development



Ray McInerney

Director, Clare Education Centre on secondment from Principal, Ennis National School

Since the pandemic, Education Support Centres have provided a wide range of online elective professional development supports. The high levels of attendance and engagement are notable. The shift to online professional development began with an emphasis on digital tools and platforms and transformed to the use of these tools for professional learning. Online elective professional learning now has a place alongside face-to-face training and development.

Introduction

Education Centre activities include the organisation and delivery of a varied local programme of support, training and professional development for teachers, school management, parents and school community members in response to demand. (ESCI, 2020)

Education Centres occupy an important space in the Irish educational system, with deep connections and trust with local schools. Research corroborates that continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers is recognised as a key vehicle through which to improve teaching and, in turn, student achievement (Carr et al., 2000; Petrie & McGee, 2012). The complex nature of teaching and teacher education has also been well documented (OECD, 2005).

The impetus for teaching communities to engage in teacher professional learning (TPL) or CPD has shifted in the last two years. This has been an unprecedented period in many ways – in education as in every other sector. CPD is viewed no longer as a requirement but as an absolute necessity.

Change and reform are a constant in education. They are integrally linked to progress and improvement and are traditionally tied with curricular reform. A major shift occurred at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, when practice reform was initiated in response to a global crisis rather than to policy or curriculum. This article documents a navigation through the crisis, which has resulted in responses to educational reform that have influenced and continue to influence the CPD landscape.

On 12 March 2020, Education Centres found themselves responding to unprecedented demand for support from schools and school staff after the sudden closure of schools because of the pandemic. The initial responses focused on the new skills required for distance and online learning. Online CPD provision then evolved to meet the needs of the shifting educational landscape.

Change and reform take time to be embedded in educational contexts. Rapid responses generally lead only to surface change. The last two years, however, have seen rapid responses and immediate changes in the nature of teaching, learning, and CPD that have proved progressive and enduring. Changes were driven by the needs of schools, a demand for new skills, and an impetus for innovative and adaptive approaches to navigate the enforced transfer of teaching and learning to a distanced learning space.

The nature of this change

According to Carr (2003), the act of teaching is conceived as grounded relationships. But in distance education there is limited scope to ground relationships. At the heart of teaching are the unique needs and interests of students. The new offsite educational landscape posed significant challenges for bridging the interpersonal gap between teachers and learners.

Teaching communities' immediate demand for supports centred on ameliorating their sense of connection and reaffirming these grounded relationships. The key question in this new environment was: *How could teachers reach out to, support, and connect with their students?*

The immediate, simple solution was to develop online supports. The online space enabled Education Centres to respond – in line with their traditional remit – by stewarding the provision of supports and opportunities for local teachers to invest in their personal and professional learning. The aim was to develop new skill sets and to provide appropriate tools to engage in distanced education.

As a consequence, teachers developed the capacity to advance teaching and learning in the new virtual landscape. Their sense of connectedness to their students was reaffirmed, to an extent. An unexpected consequence also emerged, with teachers engaging with other teachers online through the vehicle of CPD, diminishing their sense of isolation in a challenging teaching space.

A new model of engagement

The appetite for professional development in the use of digital learning tools signalled a transformative period of engagement with CPD. Through online training, teachers developed familiarity and competence in the use of digital tools and platforms to accommodate new modes of teaching and learning. Traditional training rooms were replaced with virtual meetings, online workshops, and large-scale webinars that saw exponential growth in attendance.

The key question in the new environment was: *How could teachers reach out to, support, and connect with their students?*

This accessible model of CPD relevant to the needs of schools evolved over time. The initial emphasis on digital connection broadened to include a vast menu of contemporary pedagogical approaches and engagements aligned with school-based needs. This engagement is entirely elective, guided by the evolving needs of individual teachers and schools. Remarkably, even though the online space does not respect traditional geographical boundaries, the digital platforms served to strengthen and grow the connections between Education Centres and their local school communities.

Transformative practice

Learning is lifelong. For students to develop as active learners, they need to experience learning at every level of an organisation by witnessing teachers and school leaders as lead learners in schools. Feiman-Nemser (2001) observes that ‘what students learn depends on what and how teachers teach; and what and how teachers teach depends on knowledge, skills and commitments they bring to their teaching and the opportunities they have to continue learning’. Teachers can provide the elements from which success stories are created if they are given the space and opportunities to do so.

“ Teachers’ willingness to engage in elective online CPD continues to grow exponentially.

How school community members engage in professional learning varies considerably (Knight et al., 2014). Recently a key challenge has been to provide a wide variety of online professional learning supports that recognise varied needs and enable teachers to respond to challenges. CPD has grown in the online space. What started with a narrow emphasis on skills for digital teaching has expanded to include wider provision in all curricular areas in both primary and post-primary sectors. The needs of parents as primary educators and of wider school-community members have also been supported.

During this period of transformative practice, changes in teaching and learning approaches are now being consolidated in classrooms. What may have been viewed as an interim model of CPD leveraging distanced teaching and learning has now evolved to enhance teaching and learning in classrooms. This suggests that online CPD is highly relevant.

Teachers’ willingness to engage in elective online CPD continues to grow exponentially. The enhanced breadth and wider reach of online CPD provision have catered for this demand, and there are anecdotal signs of the emergence of a professional learning trend. Teachers are placing more value on their own learning, which aligns with the reflective practitioner model advocated by Cosán, the Teaching Council’s framework for teachers’ learning.

Rapid evolution

When distance learning dominated the school calendar in 2020–21, teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) broadened their CPD horizons. The expected narrow focus on digital learning tools transformed to the use of those tools for engagement in CPD. The increased demand for CPD was

manifest in an evolving and broadening programme of supports provided by Education Centres.

The appetite for elective CPD was apparent in the numbers of attendees and in the requests for access to recordings of sessions and for follow-up sessions. The levels of engagement in webinars, conferences, meetings, communities of practice, panel discussions, online workshops, and additional supports provide strong evidence – anecdotal and statistical – that teachers and SNAs value their professional learning. They have shown a strong commitment and investment of time by voluntarily accessing CPD relevant to their needs.

There is evidence also of the evolution of online CPD delivery tools to increase attendees' active participation through polls, surveys, chat boxes, padlets, shared drives, moderated sessions, digital interactive tools, and professional learning discussions. Feedback shows that teachers place a high value on shared professional learning, the creation and sharing of resources and ideas, and the practical application of contemporary research relevant to their teaching practice.

Feedback shows that teachers place a high value on shared professional learning, the creation and sharing of resources and ideas, and the practical application of contemporary research relevant to their teaching practice.

The reopening of schools has seen further evidence of continued engagement in elective CPD. Educators should be celebrated for their extraordinary commitment to their students' learning and their own learning. We have seen the enormous investment of time by teachers engaging in CPD outside of school hours. This is commendable, as time is a precious resource.

Future landscape

Elective online CPD is becoming established, but it is too soon yet to ascertain its direct impact in schools. As with all change and reform in their early stages, there are many questions to be addressed about the future of online professional learning:

- How will we ensure it is a model for future excellence rather than a model for future convenience?
- How will online elective CPD differ from face-to-face CPD?
- How will active and authentic engagement in online CPD be facilitated?
- What elements of CPD can best be delivered online or face to face?
- How do we evaluate online CPD?
- How can we ensure that online CPD is a valuable model?

So rapid is the pace of change in modern society that most of the jobs we are equipping our students for do not yet exist (Townsend, 2007). It is incumbent upon teachers then to adapt and evolve, and to prize innovative thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. This requires engagement in CPD.

The present CPD landscape in Ireland shows that school community members are highly invested in the future of education and enthusiastically embrace their professional development, in service to their students. I would argue that online elective CPD has a long-term role to play in this

learning future. This does not delimit the importance of and necessity for face-to-face training and development, but it may find a comfortable place alongside it.

REFERENCES

Carr, D. (2003) *Making Sense of Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy and Theory of Education and Teaching*. Routledge.

Carr, M., McGee, C., Jones, A., McKinley, E., Bell, B., Barr, H., and Simpson, T. (2000) The effects of curricula and assessment on pedagogical approaches and on educational outcomes. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Education Support Centres Ireland (ESCI) (2020) Statement of Strategy 2020–2023. www.esci.ie.

Feiman-Nemser, S. (2001) 'From preparation to practice: Designing a continuum to strengthen and sustain teaching', *Teachers College Record*, 103(6).

Knight, S.L., Lloyd, G.M., Arbaugh, F., Gamson, D., McDonald, S.P., Nolan Jr., J. and Whitney, A.E. (2014) 'Performance assessment of teaching: Implications for teacher education', *Journal of Teacher Education*, 65(5).

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2005) *Teachers matter: Attracting, developing and retaining effective teachers*. Paris: OECD.

Petrie, K. and McGee, C. (2012) 'Teacher professional development: Who is the learner?', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(2).

Townsend, T. (ed.) (2007) *International Handbook of School Effectiveness and Improvement: Review, Reflection and Reframing*. Springer International Handbooks of Education.



Virtual Mathematics Meeting