

Four lessons for professional learning

Aldenham School, Hertfordshire, has developed its 'Teaching Partners' programme to help drive continual improvement in classroom practice. Assistant Head (Learning), Luke Harding, draws four lessons from Aldenham's experience of designing professional learning for teachers.



Luke Harding

“I once worked with a headteacher who gave great assemblies inspired by the poetry of Robert Frost. Every year, she'd find a new use for:

*Two roads diverged in a wood,
and I,*

I took the one less travelled by...

If teachers in the independent sector are travellers in a gloomy wood, cast over by shadows shaped like VAT on fees, a challenging recruitment situation and ever-increasing parental expectations, we might well imagine a choice between two diverging roads.

Road one takes you to a school with well-informed, research-engaged teachers, always striving for best practice in the classroom. Road two, on the other hand, heads in the opposite direction. It leads to a gingerbread common room, full of well-being and work-life balance, and which no-one would ever want to leave.

What a stark choice: teachers who are learning, or teachers who are happy. But I would suggest there's no such incompatibility. The best teachers are both committed to learning and in a good place emotionally and physically. Ask a teacher what gets in the way and the most common answer is 'workload'. So how can we make sure professional learning isn't just one more task on the to-do list of extremely busy people?

Teaching Partners

At Aldenham, we were determined to avoid the notorious beartraps of professional learning. We didn't want to launch an initiative that disappears a year later. We didn't want glitzy INSET day presentations, forgotten as soon as the first bell rings. And we certainly didn't want to impose

extra workload or rigid rules for teaching on a capable and diverse cohort of teachers.

Our solution was 'Teaching Partners'. Colleagues are paired up for a year of observing and discussing each other's lessons. Despite its apparent simplicity, our development of Teaching Partners offers some valuable lessons for the design of professional learning.

1. Start with trust

We thought about trust in two ways. First, the need to build teachers' trust that professional learning matters enough to be noticed and valued (see point 3, below). And second, the kind of trust which makes us feel secure in observing and discussing colleagues' lessons.

Our rhetoric around the launch of Teaching Partners emphasised confidentiality, including an explicit direction not to discuss observed lessons with any third party. It is key in peer-to-peer observation that the curiosity is about students' learning, not the performance of your colleague. Our recommended reading for this, Graham Nuttall's *The Hidden Lives of Learners*, gives a compelling warning to anyone tempted to make judgements about lesson quality.

2. Research is a compass, not a map

Teaching Partners was developed with ideas colleagues had encountered in formal study. However, research findings are often available in highly accessible summaries. (In our case, the OECD's *What makes a school a learning organisation?*)

We distilled our reading into simple guiding principles for good professional learning:

- Teachers should access new ideas
- and apply them in their day-to-day work
- over a sustained period of time,
- processing their learning through discourse
- in a trusting environment where they feel safe to make mistakes...
- and they will be motivated to make all this effort by seeing a positive impact on their students.

But the research didn't tell us what would work at Aldenham. Guided by these principles, we ran a trial to adapt the ideas until they fitted our context.

3. Duration matters

We ran the trial for a full year. During that time, we switched from 'trios' to 'partners', and we realised partnerships work best when teachers are paired up outside of their academic department. Once Teaching Partners went live, we quickly found new things to improve. But the emphasis is on continuity. Teaching Partners is here to stay: its extended lifespan makes an enormous contribution to the status of professional learning. Duration is persuasive. When we move on from one year's focus to the next (from questioning to, say, explaining), we continue to monitor and talk about the previous focus. The energy teachers put into their learning must be valued loudly and often.

4. Measure impact

The holy grail of teachers' professional learning is the measurement of impact on student outcomes – specifically, exam results. Yet much like the holy grail, a convincing story

of impact can be tricky to get your hands on. No school enjoys anything approaching controlled conditions, and to infer that improved results are down to any single factor is an insult to colleagues' intelligence.

But we knew that teachers truly commit to change only when they believe it will have a positive impact on students' learning. Through surveys and lesson observations we could see changed classroom practices, but that isn't proof of impact on students.

As we worked through this, we found it helpful to suggest a model of how students learn. The idea is, with a shared understanding of how learning happens, we are no longer so dependent on empirical data of impact. Instead, the model of learning helps explain why one classroom approach works better than another. We gave everyone a copy of *Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory in Action* by Oliver Lovell, chunked the reading, and built activities to help colleagues engage with the book.

We are only just starting to unpack the implications of cognitive load theory. It's going to need plenty of time and conversation. The best outcome will involve countless small, unpredicted changes in classroom practice. At Aldenham, we've found that a simple professional learning structure, involving everyone in enquiry and conversation, can allow teachers to make the changes most suitable to them and their students.