



Supporting and sustaining change: action research

Principles of Learning and Teaching P–12 professional development

In undertaking the PoLT process, the leadership team and teachers are exploring and responding to the content and implications of the Principles of Learning and Teaching P–12.

Teachers may be expanding their perceptions of the teaching strategies that are appropriate for supporting student learning and engagement.

The Principles are intended to challenge teachers to reflect on and possibly review their teaching practices and reconsider their views about the way students learn. These are not trivial issues and will form the basis of substantial discussion and debate if they are engaged with significantly. To support the changes emerging from the auditing and action planning process and the development of school initiatives, an online professional learning resource has been developed. The PoLT program implies a multi-faceted view of the ways in which teachers can develop professionally, including sharing of ideas and mutual support within and across schools. DEECD research has led to the development of the Principles of Effective Professional Learning which indicate the closer teacher learning is to the classroom, the more impact it has on professional practice.

PoLT Online Professional Learning Resource

The PoLT online Professional Learning Resource has been designed to further enhance understanding of the Principles, focusing primarily on extending teacher knowledge and skills to be implemented within individual classrooms. The Online Professional Learning Resource is flexible in that it can be used by individual teachers or in facilitated groups. The Professional Learning Resource is structured around 'Guiding Questions' based on the key themes of each of the components. The other sections of the Resource, described below, support teachers in developing knowledge and strategies to assist them in considering and addressing the guiding questions or themes within their own classrooms.

Theory snapshot

A brief overview of the research that has led to inclusion of the components.

You can try this

Hands-on, practical suggestions that teachers can use in their classrooms with suggestions that promote teacher investigation regarding assistance they will require within their environment in order to master the component.

Vignettes

Snap-shots of appropriate activities and their application in a mixture of classrooms.

Reflection

A series of questions to support reflection on the outcomes of using the strategies.

Want to know more?

Internet links, references, articles and videos which will be easily accessible and will provide extra information to assist teachers in their mastery of each component

Glossary

This section includes three glossaries that have been developed for related work.

Other supporting actions

A momentum for change tends to occur once an agreed action plan has been developed and the initial auditing phase is over. However, the leadership team should develop a clear sense of purpose, to constantly encourage and communicate with teachers, to provide appropriate resources and to foster a sense of team ownership of the PoLT initiative for this to occur. Professional learning teams will need to define themselves around PoLT, and meetings need to provide opportunities to discuss core learning and teaching issues rather than focus on administration and curriculum coverage.

Helping individuals and groups

The role of the leadership team involves facilitating the development of a team ethos, arranging for and supporting group initiatives and encouraging and supporting teachers as they undergo a process of change. This involves harnessing the strengths within the school and accessing support beyond the school to inject new ideas, and resource and strategy sharing. While it involves leadership, it is not primarily about expertise. Teachers are willing, even enthusiastic, to try new ideas, if they can see the benefits for themselves and their students and if they are given the necessary support. Part of the role of the leadership team is to arrange professional development to support the action plan. Advice on working with teachers can be found in a number of sections of this manual.

Organisational Support

There will be resource and administrative needs associated with the various school-based initiatives concerning the PoLT program in the school. It is therefore very important for the leadership team to do what is possible to ensure that appropriate organisational support is available. This may involve identifying key people within the school who are in a position to help solve problems, ensuring that they recognise the significance of the initiative, and flagging the needs and the associated arguments. Whatever the organisational support requirements, they will need to be thought through as part of the action planning and the implementation process.

Monitoring and evaluating

As school-based initiatives are developed and trialed, it will be important to keep track of how well they are working for both teachers and students. Modifications can then be made where needed, to enable teachers to develop a common language about the nature and effectiveness of the initiative and so that the outcomes can be formally reported beyond the school. The leadership team will need to implement a process through which student outcomes can be monitored and also a feedback and reporting process whereby teachers can communicate variations on strategies or content and comment on what is or is not working. It is important to ensure that what is done at the school is making a difference. Evidence needs to be collected that school-based initiatives are working to improve student learning and attitudes. Classroom behaviours and teacher perceptions are an important component of monitoring. Without change in classrooms, there can be no change in student outcomes. Ideas for monitoring are given in the section below.

Reporting and disseminating

It will be important that the leadership team keeps track of what actions are being trialed and what the outcomes are and to ensure this is communicated regularly to professional learning teams. It is also important that successful school-based initiatives, challenges and solutions, events and monitoring are communicated to school council, parents and the wider community. Good ideas can be relayed to other schools and shared through Knowledge Bank.

A clear perspective on the school-based initiatives that are being worked on will need to be maintained, including the nature of the tasks that individuals and groups within the school are engaged with and what progress is being made. Some headings under which notes could be taken to form the basis for discussions are:

1. noteworthy events
2. concerns and issues
3. intended actions
4. questions, new insights, speculation.

Communication between the school leadership team and teachers is critical and regular meetings and communication of progress are important. There are aspects of reporting that are important for maintaining the momentum of the project. Reporting to the school community via staff meetings, and reports in the school newsletter and the local paper all help to establish the initiative in the school. This in turn supports teacher morale and helps gain support for initiatives. A Supporting Change Checklist is provided below to assist in checking the progress of Support.

PoLT Supporting Change Checklist

The following actions support the change process. You can use this checklist to see how well you are progressing.

Organisational Support

- developing and applying appropriate policies
- accommodating time tabling and appropriate policies
- building home, school, and community partnerships
- providing suitable space and resources

Helping Individuals and Groups

- establishing the PoLT team as a Professional Learning Community
- encouraging team work and cooperation
- providing individual support and assistance
- providing practical help
- encouraging people on a one-to-one basis
- solving problems in groups
- sharing experiences

Arranging Professional Learning

- identifying professional learning needs
- establishing professional learning teams for team inquiry/action research
- supporting teachers becoming researchers of their own practice
- encouraging mentoring, peer coaching and team teaching
- observing practice
- providing feedback
- using modelling and demonstrations
- developing new learning and teaching strategies

Monitoring and Evaluating and Reporting

- monitoring student attitudes and achievement
- monitoring teachers' knowledge, skills and concerns
- monitoring change over time
- discussing progress
- evaluating initiatives
- reporting at staff meetings
- sharing results beyond the school
- encouraging others to engage in similar activities

Developing an approach to supporting and sustaining change

Quite apart from the question of how best to work with teachers in a leadership role to support the change process, there are significant questions concerning how best to target attention, and at what level change in the school is best supported. Should energy be focused on working across the school with professional learning teams, or on particular individuals? How should we think about change?

Change can occur at different levels. For example, there might be:

1. a greater emphasis on the priority of learning and teaching in the school
2. a focus on discussions and understanding of the Principles and their components, and their relevance in the school
3. changes in individual teachers' strategies and practices, and for some teachers a confirming and strengthening of their current practices. This can involve the sharing of ideas and reporting back, and the generation of enthusiasm.
4. changes in planning at year levels, by groups of teachers examining their practice and generating a coherent and agreed approach. This is a more fundamental and 'embedded' type of change and involves the incorporation of the Principles into the curriculum across learning areas, and their use in planning classroom strategies.
5. a more coherent approach implemented across units at different levels.

These examples illustrate that change can occur when different professional learning teams worked across and within year levels and learning areas and with individual teachers. To achieve embedded change, it is important to work with year-level teams planning units and assessment. Working at the level of the staff as a whole or at the level of individual teachers is not enough.

School leadership

The school leadership and culture is critical to supporting and validating the work of teachers. Without commitment to improvement, the pressure and support required is not forthcoming. Experience and research has emphasised the importance of the role of the school leadership team, and particularly the principal, to the success of the initiative. The principal can support the PoLT initiative in a variety of ways; by according it a central place within school policy initiatives; by identifying links with current initiatives to support the PoLT strategy, for example Victorian Essential Learning Standards implementation, development

of a Performance and Development Culture, Teacher Professional Leave and the School Accountability and Improvement Framework; by using it as a platform to focus more generally on learning and teaching; by offering advice and showing interest and by offering tangible support when it is needed.

The importance of Professional Learning teams

The professional learning teams that plan and provide support for the PoLT strategy produce an atmosphere to support change, enthusiasm and direction, and can raise the profile of learning and teaching initiatives. Individual teachers can derive nourishment from such conversations and will try out different strategies and report back as part of these initiatives.

The professional learning team conversations can derive a lot of strength from the work of individual teachers doing interesting and powerful things which may have been unacknowledged. These can lead to mentoring or peer-coaching arrangements between individuals within the teams.

Planning groups

The real engine of change in learning and teaching must be the planning groups. It is during close planning that teachers really need to talk about their beliefs and knowledge and their understanding of student learning. Ensuring the change is embedded involves teachers planning in groups, and creating and recording learning and teaching sequences.

Supporting teachers

What types of support do teachers need in developing their practice? The leadership team will probably be working at a number of levels. Ultimately, it is the individual teacher working with students in the classroom who is the focus of the PoLT initiative. However, support and encouragement can occur at a number of levels and by a variety of approaches.

Encouraging a coherent focus on learning

- Teachers need to be committed to student learning. This will involve encouraging talking and thinking about how students learn best and about what learning in particular learning areas means. It may involve cutting back on content, being more flexible in planning sequences and focusing clearly on what is planned to be learned.
- Teachers need to focus on significant outcomes – to be clear what these are and why they are important.

Working within the classroom culture and teacher beliefs

- In providing support, there is a need to take account of teachers' beliefs and classroom cultures and work with these.
- It is important that teachers be open to change and be willing to try new strategies and ways of working. A major task of the leadership team is to set the stage for this to occur.

Teacher skills

- There are a number of teaching skills that teachers will need to develop to implement significant change. Examples include the critical role of open-ended questioning; of running open discussions; of working to encourage collaboration within groups; and of supporting more open problem solving or investigative approaches.
- Teachers need to be encouraged and supported to transport their skills from learning areas that represent their strength to others.

Modelling and observation

- The power of modelling should be acknowledged and harnessed. Highly skilled teachers should be observed and their styles and repertoires discussed. A highly effective teacher might be asked to model a successful open-ended activity to demonstrate what is possible if the teacher hands a measure of control and responsibility to students. Modelling can be set up in mentoring, peer-coaching and team teaching arrangements, by utilising outside expertise, or by the coordinator working within the classroom with teachers.

Mentoring and peer-coaching

- Teachers need timely support as they work at trying new strategies and approaches. Ways need to be found to provide advice and ideas and develop a situation of open dialogue. A good team atmosphere will provide this.
- The mentoring partnership offers beginning and returning teachers motivation, guidance, feedback and advice to consolidate personal and professional confidence.
- Peer coaching offers teachers the opportunity to problem-solve in the workplace by observing one another's classrooms, conducting classroom research, and by reflecting on, refining and sharing their practices in a non judgemental, non threatening, secure environment.

Maintaining energy

- Schools can be affected by principal replacements, leadership issues, teacher mobility and competing interests and foci. Strategies to ensure renewal of professional learning team membership and protocols to engender group ownership of decisions and school-based initiatives can be explored to maintain group energy.

Assessment

- There is enormous potential in using assessment to help teachers focus on, and resolve, learning and teaching issues. Developing clarity about what is to be learned, as part of the planning process, can be challenging but often points to productive ways forward.
- Working with teachers to structure ongoing assessment developed by planning teams or year-level groups, is more powerful than post hoc construction of end-of-unit tests.
- Focusing on school reporting formats and reporting processes can open up significant discussion of learning and teaching issues.

Characteristics of the planned units

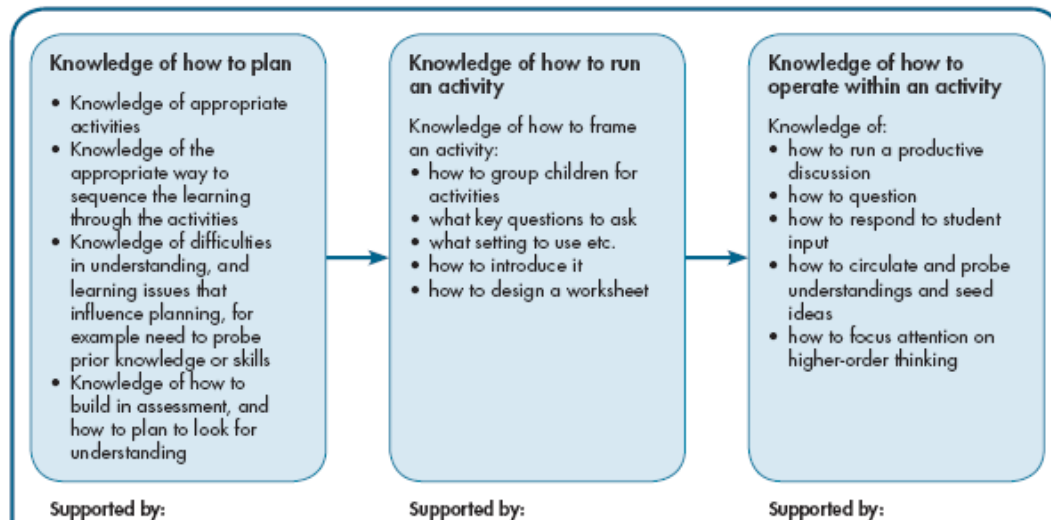
The leadership team should find ways to make teachers aware of:

- the importance of a clear conceptual framework to focus the unit and allow real discussion of learning and how to support it
- the importance of breaking down the content into manageable and sensible chunks that can act as a basis for structured activities and student learning
- the power of suggesting/providing productive activities that allow scope for student engagement with ideas in a way that is manageable for teachers. Finding resources that do this can alert teachers to new learning and teaching possibilities.
- the need to cut down on activities and address ideas more thoroughly than is normally the case.

Supporting growth in knowledge of learning and teaching

We can look at different aspects of teacher knowledge related to planning and running activities, each of which requires support of a different kind.

Supporting growth in knowledge of learning and teaching



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledgeable colleagues providing ideas, challenging thoughts at planning meetings • Provision or collaborative planning of sample sequences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploration and discussion at planning meetings • Provision of detailed examples • Reflection and shared learning on previous activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom observation and critique • Close working or co-teaching with colleague at the same level • Peer coach dialogue and feedback • In depth reflection and analysis following lessons
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Action research

Introduction

The most meaningful professional learning is done by and with teachers, not to teachers. The PoLT program is underpinned by a shift in thinking about professional development away from models that position teachers as the receivers of knowledge developed by others. This shift is a key reason for government support in the last few years for initiatives that encourage teachers to engage in action research.

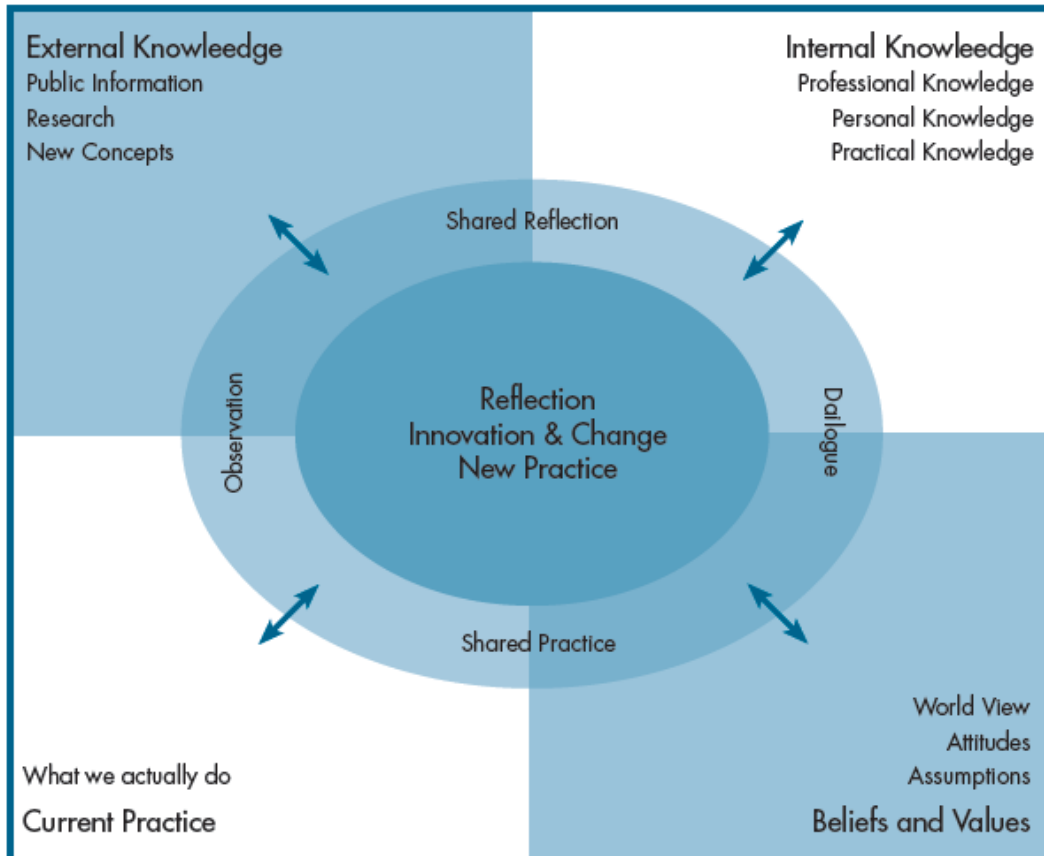
Action research is a process in which practitioners, often in collaborative groups, research their own practice through a cycle of identifying an area of interest or concern, developing and trialling a relevant intervention, reflecting on the outcome, reframing, elaborating or extending the original concern and developing a further intervention. The 'research' goals do not remain fixed, but evolve and change as the teachers learn more about their own practice.

Good teachers have inquiring minds. Action research is about seeking information or knowledge by investigating and questioning. It is a planned and considered approach to the teaching and learning challenges that build classroom knowledge. It enables thoughtful consideration to:

- focus the inquiry on areas of importance to the teachers
- plan for action
- collect evidence in a systematic way so that you will know what has changed and why
- reflect on evidence and making judgements
- plan new responses.

Good teachers have always used aspects of the action research process to think about what is happening in their classrooms by:

- asking questions about what is working or not working
- responding to identified challenges
- monitoring, assessing and observing
- making evaluations
- adjusting actions or taking new ones
- asking new questions.



Adapted from Butler's Model of Personal Action (Edwards, Butler, Hill & Russell 1997, p. 175)

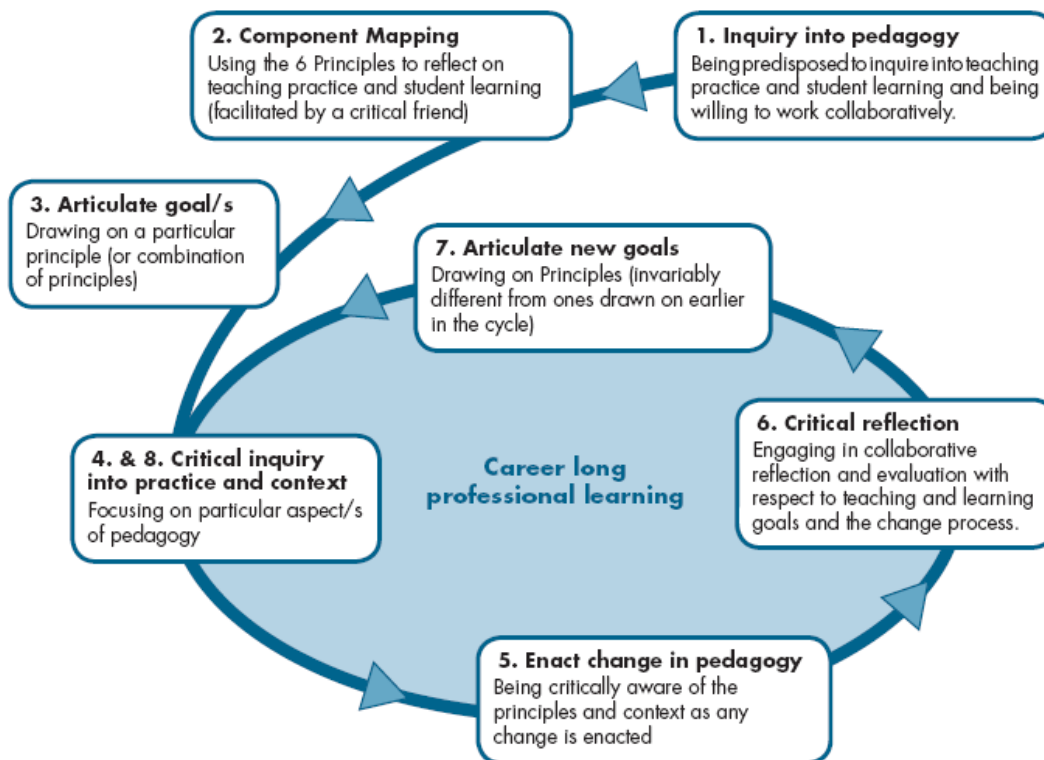


Figure 1: Cycle of action research with respect to POLT

Where there is a mismatch between our current practice and our internal knowledge, external knowledge and beliefs and values we are more likely to reflect upon it and seek new ways of doing it – to make innovations and to change our practice.

The processes of reflection may be individual and internal but much more likely to have an impact when reflection is shared through processes of dialogue and practice is shared through observation and discussion of the outcomes of student learning.

The tools for action research

What follows is a suggested process, format and tools for action research that builds classroom knowledge and practice. Use of this process will also provide schools and systems with evidence through which they will be able to show what is being done at the classroom level to meet learning and teaching challenges and to bring about improvements.

The process described is based on a model of change explained by the diagram (above).

We have a body of internal knowledge that is based on our understanding built up through experience about:

- Professional knowledge – teaching
- Personal knowledge about ourselves, our students and relationships with them
- Practical knowledge – what works in the classroom.

We also have a repertoire of current practice - what we do now. In general we keep on doing what we are doing unless the results of that practice are problematic. A shift in practice depends on our willingness to acknowledge there is a problem. Even then, a shift in our behaviours and practices is dependent on our beliefs, values and assumptions, and knowledge of what else we could do.

Action research—timeline and stages

Term	Stages	Semester
Weeks 1–2	1. Identifying teaching and learning challenges 1.1 Selecting a team focus – professional knowledge 1.2 Considering the learning and teaching challenges 1.3 Considering potential actions 1.4 Developing an action research question	Weeks 1–4
Weeks 3–8	2. Inquiry into classroom practice 2.1 Learning more about the learning and teaching challenge 2.2 Planning an intervention 2.3 Planning for collecting and analysing evidence of change resulting from an intervention 2.4 Enacting the plan	Weeks 5–14
Weeks 9–10	3. Reviewing and sharing the action research 3.1 Action research team interaction 3.2 Reporting to others 3.3 Reflecting on the action research process	Weeks 15–18

The stages and timeline (above) outline the ways in which the action research process could be put into practice over a term or semester. The following materials are organised according to these stages.

Stage 1 Identifying learning and teaching challenges

1.1 Selecting a team focus

This will be determined by the group. Your PoLT action plan will help you establish this.

Use this section to think about the students who may be involved in the action research project.

Who are you targeting? (type of group / situation) You may be intending to implement the approach in a range of different ways – whole class, small group or individual; within a particular domain or project.	
What do you know about these students? You may have existing information about these students, their literacy and other factors that may influence their response to the intervention.	

1.2 Considering the learning and teaching challenges

Use the following prompts to think about your teaching and learning challenges for this class or these students.

Prompts	Your Responses
I would like to improve ...	
I am perplexed by ...	
Some people are unhappy about ...	
I am really curious about ...	
I want to learn more about ...	

1.3 Considering potential actions

Use this section, either individually or as a group, to brainstorm potential actions that might address the learning and teaching challenges that you have identified. Consider actions that might make a difference.

It is not necessary to fill every space.

Something I think would really make a difference is...	
The action or strategy I need to try first is ...	
Some other things I'd like to try are...	
Right now, some areas I'm particularly interested in are...	

1.4 Developing an action research question:

Use the previous sections to develop your action research question.

A good action research question:

- seeks explanations, reasons, relationships between teaching and learning — “how does....?”
“what happens when....?”
- is manageable, staged, and can be completed in a defined time and within the resources available to you
- relates to your practice as a teacher
- provides you with an opportunity to stretch your knowledge and understanding
- provides a deeper understanding of the topic, question or issue
- is valued and meaningful to you, others and the school.

General focus (decided by the professional learning team)

You may have more specific questions relating to:

- Specific aspects of learning and teaching
- Individual student learning needs

Focus for your action research