



Professional Learning through Practice

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ABSTRACT

This practice article explores the relationship between practice and professional learning. Are these two distinctly separate activities, competing for the time of a staff member, or are practice and learning linked? If so, what is the nature of this link and how can we best align professional learning with practice outcomes? Using an example from the everyday work of a GSE Special Education Advisor (SEA), this article explores how a professional might link learning and practice for improved student outcomes. It illustrates how learning might occur as a staff member reflects on day to day work challenges, sets related learning objectives, and chooses and uses a wide range of activities to learn through practice.

Practice paper

KEYWORDS:

Professional practice, evidence-based practice, professional development, learning activities, reflection, school readiness.

PRACTICE AS A BASIS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Learning as defined in evidence-based practice (EBP), communities of practice (COP), situated learning and reflective practice all challenge traditional views of professional development. Understanding professional development as only attending courses and conferences fails to address the need to transform information into professional knowledge and practice. In GSE, a broader definition of professional development is accepted. Professional development can be defined as a range of learning activities through which professionals maintain and develop themselves throughout their career to ensure that they retain their capacity to practice safely, effectively and legally in their scope of practice (Disley, 2005).

Day-to-day practice provides professionals with the rationale for learning, that is, moments when the problems and issues are clear, but the best course of action is not. When making EBP decisions, practitioners must draw on evidence from research, professional knowledge and information from the student, family, whānau and/or school (Holley, 2003). Professional knowledge is a central aspect of this process (Rappolt, 2003). It is situated in experience and occurs as a function of the activity, context and culture (Lave & Wenger, 1990) and is understood through critical reflection with others who share the experience (Buyse, Sparkman & Wesley, 2003). Professional learning occurs in the broader context of COP; of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and who interact regularly to 'learn how to do it better' (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002).

The Cochrane Effective Practice and Organisation of Care Group has summarised the literature from research trials about what is and is not effective in changing professional practice i.e. supporting professionals to adopt effective practices and to move away from ineffective or harmful practices (Greenhalgh, 2001). Didactic education (formal teaching as in lectures), was shown to have low levels of effectiveness while interactive hands on education, based on the desire to be more effective in practice, was shown to be more effective. Interactive learning was most effective when real clinical problems were the basis of learning and where learning was linked in with the context of the service, improved teamwork and organisational development (Greenhalgh, 2001).

To explore how practice and learning activities may combine to support professional learning, a practice example is outlined below. This is not a true story but it draws from many true practice stories shared in GSE offices. The story spans one year and is told from the perspectives of the student, family, education provider and a GSE staff member, because professional learning should lead to better outcomes for all these groups. Some details have been omitted in order to focus on how learning occurred rather than what was learned.

The beginning of the story is not the start of service provision. Joel was verified with Ongoing Resource Reviewable Scheme funding at age five and has attended school and received ongoing services since that time. Below is Joel's school experience from his perspective, and that of his family and school, and the GSE key worker.

JOEL IN JULY

Joel is seven years old and he lives with his parents. His interests at school are playing with doors, playing on the computer, running, going to the swimming pool and taking his shoes and clothes off in inappropriate places. He communicates by gestures, doing what he wants, and by throwing things or running away. Joel feels anxious when travelling to school in the taxi, he likes to make noises and ensure that the other children do not touch him. There are new teacher aides at school who try to assist him but they do not know what he likes yet because they are new.

JOEL'S FAMILY IN JULY

Joel's parents, Jan and Graham, just want Joel to learn to talk, to stop running away, and to travel in the taxi and keep his clothes on. They find Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings hard, especially when Joel's behaviour is discussed.

They appreciate the support from the team, which includes people from the school, GSE, a private behavioural therapist, the IDEA Services (formally IHC), Tautoko Services, and a needs assessor, but Jan and Graham find it difficult to keep track of all the people. Joel has a new specialist teacher this year and he will have to move classes at the end of the year which concerns his parents. They employ a private behavioural therapist who works with Joel at home and school, but find this is a drain on the family budget.

SCHOOL IN JULY

Joel's behaviour at school can be stressful for staff. He is intent on running out of the classroom and the door has to be locked. At times Joel has been physically prevented from running. Two people are needed to supervise Joel at interval so he doesn't run away. Although he works well in his private behavioural therapy sessions, these skills don't flow over into the rest of the school day. Joel does not participate easily in the class programme, despite the introduction of consequences by the class teacher and teacher aide. Joel's specialist teacher left to go on parental leave last year. His new teacher has not worked with a student who has autism before, and finds it hard to manage Joel's behaviour and to engage him in curriculum tasks.

DAVE IN JULY

As a relatively new SEA to GSE, Dave works with school-aged children in a school focus team. He is committed to enabling children who have special education needs access to quality learning experiences at their local school. He previously taught a class of students in the United Kingdom all of whom had physical disabilities. Joel is the second student with autism that Dave has worked with.

The school experience described above presents Dave with a context and culture for learning. He needed to learn which ideas and interventions would provide effective support for Joel, his school and family. The learning process he may have used is explored below.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND SETTING LEARNING GOALS

In adult learning theory, professional learning is facilitated by cyclic experiences that involve direct concrete experiences, observation and reflection, as well as abstract concept formation from which behaviour may be modified and tested to aid new experiences (Kolb, 1984).

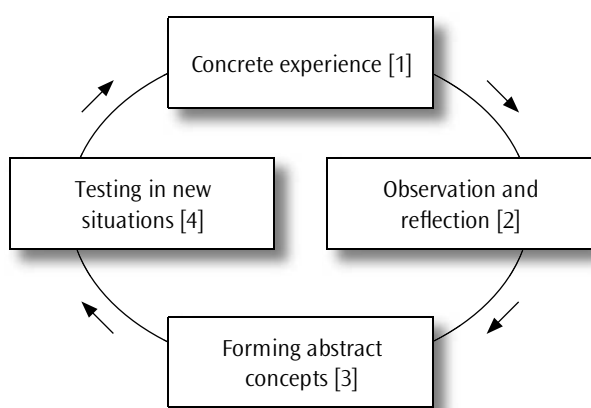


Figure 1. Professional development learning cycle

Kolb and Fry (1975) argue that the learning cycle can begin at any one of the four points and that it should be approached as a continuous spiral. It is suggested that the learning process often begins with a person carrying out a particular action and then seeing the effect of the action in this situation. Dave's learning objectives came from his observations of Joel at school, home, and from his own critical reflection where he identified a need to add skills quickly in relation to autism and behaviour management.

His learning goals included the need to:

- develop Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) specific knowledge and strategies to support others to teach Joel and to manage challenging behaviour
- develop the confidence to work with the school and family despite concerns that others knew more about ASD
- examine ethical and legal issues around restraint of children - Dave had concerns about the restraint he observed being used at school
- learn to manage his workload to ensure that time is available to work with Joel without other students missing out
- understand the role of other team members working with Joel in order to work as key worker for the GSE team, including consulting the speech-language therapist (SLT) to look at ways of establishing functional communication, the occupational therapist (OT) to look at property modifications and sensory assessments, the psychologist for behaviour management planning, and Tautoko for home programming.

LEARNING THROUGH PRACTICE, TEAMING AND REFLECTION

Some of Dave's learning goals were met directly through his work with Joel and the team; through visits to home and school, formal observations and interviews, reading previous case notes, attending team meetings and making joint visits with the SLT and OT to school. As the pivotal member of the team, Joel had an important role in teaching Dave. Dave worked with the school to build positive relationships with Joel. He learned to engage Joel in learning tasks, facilitated peer interaction with Joel, taught others to manage challenging behaviour, decreased the use of restraint at school, selected a new school site and worked with a team to plan transition to the new school.

Dave was able to identify a number of points he learned through other people in the team.

1. Joel taught him to watch, be patient and look for his special interests, strengths and attempts to communicate.
2. Joel's parents taught him to see Joel as a child first.
3. Tautoko Services showed him how to build a connection with Joel. Dave used these skills to learn to play with Joel, using the boy's interests to connect.
4. The SLT taught Dave about the challenges Joel faced in communication and gave him strategies to use. He watched the SLT work with Joel and his teacher aide, as she encouraged the use of comic strip strategies to plan a series of tasks during the school day.

5. The OT conducted an assessment using *The Sensory Profile* (Dunn, 1999), involving Joel's parents and school staff. Dave accompanied her and recognised some of the sensory challenges and interests that Joel faced, and linked these to his choices of task, people and behaviour.
6. The private behavioural therapist taught him how to work with Joel to keep him on task.
7. The psychologist taught him about applied behavioural analysis (ABA) and how this can be used in the inclusive school setting (La Vigna & Donnellon, 1995).
8. The SLT had recently attended the Tips for Autism Course, and the reading material for this was shared providing an easily accessible overview of ASD, educational implications and effective strategies for schools.

LEARNING THROUGH LINE MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL

The GSE context has impact on practice and learning. This can be illustrated through Dave's work with his service manager. Initially he discussed his need to learn new skills quickly in areas relating to ASD. Dave also had concerns about student safety. These had to be reported to his service manager who followed up some issues directly with the school. Workload management was a key issue and work with other students needed to be minimised to allow Dave time to work intensively with Joel. When conducting his performance appraisal, Dave included his learning goals in relation to ASD in his own individual learning plan (ILP). This meant he would seek professional development opportunities specific to the education of students with ASD when they arose. His service manager enjoyed hearing updates of Joel's story and, over time, Dave received supportive feedback about the quality of his work with Joel and the social and educational outcomes achieved.

LEARNING THROUGH SUPERVISION

While practice itself provided multiple learning opportunities, and learning goals were articulated in the ILP, supervision was also a critical learning activity. Supervision is defined as a structured, safe, reciprocal relationship for reflecting on practice and self-in-work (see *The National Supervision Framework*, Ministry of Education, Special Education, 2005). Dave's supervisor lacked experience in working with students with ASD but this was acceptable because Dave and his supervisor were able to explore what he needed to learn and who could assist in that process. Dave and his supervisor contracted to meet fortnightly with additional phone contact between sessions if required.

Dave found working with Joel very challenging. Despite the positive outcomes, this work was stressful and challenging. Dave needed to explore his feelings of efficacy in this work and seek feedback from his supervisor and other team members. At times he felt he should pass this work to a more experienced staff member. Other supervision topics included ethical issues around restraint, whether Joel should move schools, managing the ongoing stress

for school staff, working with other providers, managing the workload and applying knowledge from literature to practice. Dave consistently took a strengths-based approach to this work and used supervision to maintain his personal belief that improved outcomes were possible for Joel in a regular school. Workload/caseload management was an important issue, and this was discussed with his manager but monitored over time with his supervisor.

LEARNING THROUGH A RANGE OF INDIVIDUALLY PLANNED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

In supervision Dave planned other learning activities to match his learning goals. He undertook his own reading and research into ASD, which involved accessing websites and library materials. A search of the GSE library catalogue located many items relating to autism. Another colleague suggested *Educating Children with Autism* which provided a strong evidence based approach (National Research Council, 2002). The Professional Resources database provided critically appraised resources relevant to work with students who have ASD including *The Sensory Profile* (Dunn, 1999), *Solving Behaviour Problems in Autism: Improving communication with visual strategies* (Hodgdon, 1999), and *Writing Social Stories* (Gray, 2000).

Dave joined the ASD list serve established by the professional practice advisor ASD. As a GSE staff member, Dave was already involved in or able to access different COP through his school focus team, other SEAs (by an email list), and other staff who work with students who have severe and challenging behaviour (through office contacts). Dave posted questions on the SEA email list to seek support and ideas.

Staff in Dave's team are required to conduct a peer review of practice or a client review each term. He arranged to conduct a client review with a staff member specialising in behaviour, who visited school with him and reviewed his work with Joel. A second peer review of practice centred on the need to review the use of assistive technology for Joel so the technology coordinator met with Dave and looked at the options trialled with Joel to date.

Dave's formal professional development was to attend the ASD conference. He also put his name on the Autism NZ mailing list for information on relevant ASD related courses. He brought back video presentations on a range of ASD topics to share with other staff. Dave also linked with the local ASD parent support group.

The outcomes of Dave's learning can be explored by reviewing the stories of Joel, his family and school, and Dave one year later. During this time Joel, his family and team worked together to find a new school placement, support his transition, and to engage him in social and leaning tasks in the new school. Although not attributable purely to Dave's learning and professional practice the improved outcomes for Joel, his family, and school are evident.

JOEL ONE YEAR ON

Joel has a new school. His interests at school are playing with doors, playing on the computer, running, going to the swimming pool taking his shoes and clothes off, helping his teacher aide do jobs around the school, reading his early readers, doing his printing and, sometimes playing alongside other children. He is starting to talk at school and has favourite classmates and teachers. He greets Dave by name when he visits the school. His teacher aide uses his comic strips to prepare him for what to do next, and when he has completed two things he receives a reward. Joel can sit and work at his desk for short periods, put up his hand when he has finished and take his work to show his teacher. Now Joel knows his taxi driver, who puts on his favourite tape to travel to school. He received a certificate at assembly for his story writing, produced using clicker software. Joel still runs away sometimes, but other people at school and in the community know him and bring him back.

JOEL'S FAMILY ONE YEAR ON

Joel's parents know the support team well. They know and trust the school principal and feel confident that if they call the school or GSE they will have a rapid, positive response. Joel's mother Jan has joined the local ASD support group and uses the sensory strategies and comic strip conversations at home, too. Because of the progress that Joel has made at school, his private behavioural therapy has decreased. He still has some challenging days at home and school, and Jan is looking at starting some respite care for Joel.

NEW SCHOOL ONE YEAR ON

Other children at the school greet Joel when they see him in the playground. They know to ignore his different behaviour. Joel's teacher and teacher aides enjoy teaching Joel and know what to do and who to ask when things are difficult. The other teachers in his school know Joel well and will include him in their lessons if he runs into their room. The neighbours living close to the school and the local swimming pool, know who Joel is and who to contact if he runs away. The school considers Joel to be a valued school member and is willing to make the accommodations he needs to be included.

DAVE ONE YEAR ON

Dave has not simply gained information about ASD. He has a working knowledge of approaches and strategies for practice and a sense of self-efficacy when working with students who have ASD. He has strengthened learning networks which prepare him for Joel's next challenges. He also knows what he needs to learn next and what supports he would like to have in place at the office such as easily accessible office material on ASD. He plans to put a collection of reading resources together next holidays.

CONDITIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THROUGH PRACTICE

If learning occurs through practice then it is useful to consider what conditions have added to or detracted from this learning.

Conditions that supported the practitioner's new learning included:

- the sharing of learning activities that were understood and used by the team
- effective relationships between practitioners and managers
- an office culture of critical reflection in a climate of safety and acceptance
- self regulated learning rather than externally imposed learning goals and tasks
- managed workloads
- clearly defined roles between management and supervision
- a collective vision that improved outcomes are possible
- experience in the broader team and organisation for the work of communities of practice.

Conditions that would have been helpful for practitioner learning include guidelines for effective education services and other evidence-based resources for children with ASD, written in user friendly language.

LEARNING AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

Joel's story illustrates student outcomes – he can ride happily in the taxi, participate in curriculum activities, he runs away less and is safer when he does, sits at his desk, is starting to talk, read, and build relationships. Outcomes can also be seen for the school and family, and for Dave. In collaborative teams, Joel's progress cannot be solely attributed to Dave's learning or practice, as many factors contribute to outcomes. It does however suggest a link between Dave's work, effective team practices, effective teaching and positive student outcomes (Alton-Lee, 2003; Timperley, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Professional learning and development plans and activities should be individualised, based on the needs of the staff member, the job requirements and the needs of the specific student(s) in their contexts. This approach allows professionals and managers to ensure time spent in learning activities adds value to practice.

This practical example illustrates how a professional can learn through practice. A range of learning activities, including practice itself, planning with management and supervision form the central core of learning when based on individual learning needs and real practice challenges. COP and other professional learning activities add depth and wider learning networks to these core learning activities. By linking practice and professional learning and development through cycles of self regulated, contextual learning, professionals can develop and apply professional knowledge to improve outcomes. Broader team and organisational conditions that enhance professional learning should be identified and supported within teams.

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AUTHOR PROFILE

Jill Ford is a service manager for the Marlborough/Kaikoura GSE team, and a registered OT who has worked in schools for over 20 years. Previously she worked as a practice advisor on national projects including supervision, evidence-based practice, portfolios, ASD guidelines and COP.

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