

# Exploring Professionalism



# Exploring Professionalism

Exploring Professionalism introduces the benefits of professional learning communities and a culture of professional inquiry. The module also describes strategies and methods to stay informed about content and pedagogy, seek feedback from colleagues and develop a professional growth plan. Key elements include participation in professional learning communities, continuity of professional growth and development, the consistent modeling of professionalism, and the benefits of providing volunteer services to school and district projects. Protecting and furthering the interests of individual students are the highest priorities when considering professionalism. Experienced and novice teachers alike may benefit from the professional pathways illuminated in the following pages.

Teachers attain the required status of professionals by performing against and behaving according to a set of expectations. Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998, p. xi) define a professional as “someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base.” Professional teachers are highly-qualified and continually look for opportunities such as courses, workshops, and professional dialogue to enhance knowledge, expertise, and skills. They value the cultivation of professional relationships with both colleagues and students.

Charlotte Danielson stresses that student learning is the primary purpose of school environments. Additionally, Danielson urges teachers “[to] work with their colleagues to share strategies, plan joint efforts and plan for the success of individual students” (2007, p. 84). Teachers who productively collaborate in professional communities are better able to enhance the school experience for students. Kent Peterson (1994) states that, “The intended result is a supportive, professional culture that promotes the continuous renewal of instructional methods and curricular offerings in an atmosphere of collegiality, trust, and shared mission, serving all of the students in the school.” While Peterson was speaking directly to reshaping urban schools, this professional culture is essential to all schools (DuFour and Eaker, 1998).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) function on the premise that teachers and administrators, working and learning as teams, are more effective at focusing on student achievement. A focus on student learning and the needs of students should guide the behaviour of the professional teacher. Teachers can develop deep and lasting relationships with colleagues by joining PLCs. Greater effectiveness in practice is likely as teachers enjoy the support, ideas and inspiration of colleagues. A PLC provides teachers with opportunity to further their professional responsibility to improve teaching practice. Teamwork breaks down collegial communication barriers and thereby elevates the importance of student learning above other teacher concerns. The development of a professional growth plan allows for improvement in individual instructional practice.

Professional teachers create an environment of trust in the classroom. Students thrive when strategies are employed to encompass a culture of respect, rapport, and lifelong learning, and to promote and encourage honesty, integrity, and a spirit of exploration. Participation in volunteer services beyond the classroom serves to strengthen community links, trust levels, and professional teaching development.

# Information Alignment

Materials presented in this eBook align with the following:

## Module Questions

- How could have membership in a professional learning community improve instructional practice?
- What professional development strategies could have enhanced content knowledge and pedagogy skills?
- What professionalism strategies could have created a culture of respect and rapport?
- How could have a Professional Growth Plan strengthen content knowledge and pedagogy skills?

## Learning Outcomes

- Identify the benefits of professional learning and teaching communities.
- Describe collegial collaboration strategies that increase personal and professional teaching development.
- Determine appropriate professionalism strategies which encompass a culture of respect and rapport.
- Explain how volunteer service strategies strengthen content knowledge and pedagogy skills for the school, district, and community.
- Define the purpose and benefits of a Professional Growth Plan. (PGP).

## Topic Focus

### My Professional Learning Community

- Developing relationships with colleagues (sharing strategies and getting feedback) to improve practice
- Involvement in a culture of professional inquiry and service to my profession
- Service to my school and district

### Lifelong Learning

- Enhancement of content knowledge and pedagogical skill through professional development within my district
- Finding collegial support close to home (department members, department chair, cross-curricular team, grade-level team, special education team, etc) to stay current on content, best practices, and emerging educational technologies

### Showing Professionalism

- Demonstrating honesty, integrity, and professional compliance to school and district policies
- Showing that students' needs and best interest are paramount in all decision making and classroom practices
- Introduction to the Professional Growth Plan

## Table of Contents

Exploring Professionalism	—2
Information Alignment	—3
A Professional Learning Community	—5
Lifelong Learning	—7
Showing Professionalism 101	—9
Conclusion	—11
References	—12

At time of publishing, all of the website information was accurate. Due to the nature of the internet, some of the website information may have changed or become unavailable. Please see the references section of the corresponding online module for the most up-to-date information.

# A Professional Learning Community

Membership in a community of like-minded professionals brings benefits to teachers, including improved classroom instructional practice and better communication. According to Hunefeld (2009), collaboration with a team of colleagues allows problems to be identified, shared, and addressed. Participation in professional learning communities requires a set of skills in order to develop deeper relationships with colleagues. Successful membership of a PLC may promote personal growth and enable a culture of professional inquiry and trust.

## Developing Relationships with Colleagues to Improve Practice

Honawar (2008) shows that building and maintaining relationships with other teachers can help improve instructional skills and student success. Professional growth can be achieved by sharing content and strategies, working and planning together, getting feedback and remaining positive.

**Encouraging sharing.** Teachers are frequently faced with new or unfamiliar curriculum areas that require an investment of preparation time. The same applies both to teachers entering a new job or experienced teachers that are faced with significant changes to a familiar curriculum. Other challenges present themselves, such as the need for a new classroom behavior strategy during science lab or silent reading time. There may be a need for supplemental materials for a unit of study or perhaps a desire to incorporate communication using an emerging web 2.0 tool. The temptation may be to reinvent the wheel and create plans from scratch. The recommendation is to first ask colleagues for help. Departmental colleagues will have a firm grasp and deep understand of curriculum content. Grade-level colleagues may know the needs and characteristics of a group of students. New colleagues may offer a fresh perspective or knowledge of additional resources to aid instruction.

**Planning together.** Sometimes, teachers just need the feeling that they are not alone when faced with the challenges of planning lessons. Using colleagues as a sounding board can lend clarity of thought and navigate a way through difficulties. Shared planning makes sense when teaching the same material as a colleague. Sharing a task can release time to better spend in direct support of student learning. Teachers in some districts, such as New York State (New York State's curriculum management and standards-based system, n.d.), are fortunate enough to have access to online curriculum management systems that offer support in the form of standards aligned curriculum resources and online communities.

**Working together.** Working with colleagues from other subject disciplines can be very beneficial. Sharing ideas and challenges may lead to authentic opportunities to make holistic connections for students. Consultation between teachers from adjoining grade levels can benefit students by clarifying the continuum of learning. Sharing development and implementation strategies can lessen teacher anxiety about finding sufficient time to meet all responsibilities.

**Staying positive.** School cultures vary greatly. Colleagues may exhibit widely differing degrees of optimism and professionalism. New teachers are often warned of the proverbial teacher's lounge. Whether or not there is a literal teacher's lounge, it is important to maintain a sense of professionalism at school. The key is to remain positive and seek support in the quest to improve instructional practice. Colleagues can offer positive strategies to better implement curriculum, manage behavior, and support student learning. Positive thinking keeps student success at the forefront of teaching practice.

**Getting feedback.** Respected colleagues are a great source of feedback. The reflective teacher is faced by frequent concerns about student engagement and performance. Examples could include poor student performance on the latest test, the challenge of accommodating the needs of all students in the class, or keeping students on track during collaborative activities. Identifying concerns may be easy. Analyzing reasons for problems can be very difficult while teaching. One strategy is to ask a trusted colleague to observe a class or part of a lesson. Another set of professional eyes may observe details that are missed by the teacher. The colleague may notice a variety of mistakes: rough transitions between activities that disrupt flow of the lesson, negative classroom behavior stemming from layout of furniture or a lack of confidence in the delivery of a newly-revised curriculum, represent a few examples. Amy Mednick (2004) contends that "without meaningful follow-up conversation, nothing changes." Department chairs, team leaders, or grade-level colleagues can usefully be persuaded to observe lessons and give valuable feedback on classroom practice during student engagements.



## Involvement in a Culture of Professional Inquiry and Service to the Profession

Instructional content evolves, methodologies change, and new technologies emerge. Teachers have a responsibility, as lifelong learners, to stay abreast of best practices in instruction and technology integration. According to Newcombe (2003), when teachers embrace the notion of schools as learning organizations for adults and students, the focus shifts to learning rather than teaching. Teachers maintain a position at the forefront of the profession by regularly participating in professional courses that emphasize improved practice. Such courses may be offered through schools, districts, or local universities. Online communities for teachers exist for all aspects of practice, such as subject based understanding, classroom management, instructional technologies, and assessment techniques, for example. (See Lifelong Learning section for more details.)

Participation in a professional organization offers opportunities for advancement. A few examples chosen at random could be The National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP), International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). Such bodies help create an essential culture of continual improvement to personal practice and provide leadership and support to colleagues. Involvement in a culture of professional inquiry and service to the profession are responsibilities of all teachers.

Professional journals provide valuable information about latest educational developments and current debates. Educational conferences offer opportunities to both broaden knowledge and exchange ideas with colleagues from other schools. Conferences include presentations from publishers and technology providers in addition to learned talks and workshops from educators. Many of the professional organizations publish professional journals and offer the forum of an annual conference.

**Service to the school and district.** Frequently, teachers are offered opportunities to serve their school or district by performing duties that extend beyond the classroom walls. These activities may be related to the school or district at large and fall within the realm of professional service. School, district, and community initiatives and projects benefit all stakeholders. Examples may include school and district curriculum committees, textbook adoption committees, inclusion teams, technology teams, and initiatives to engage with the parent-teacher organization. Experienced teachers may assume leadership roles within these activities. Opportunities also exist for identifying grant initiatives for specialized groups at the school-level.

# Lifelong Learning

All professions, teaching included, require members to remain current and informed about latest ideas for best practice. Increased skills levels for teachers are demonstrated by greater effectiveness in teaching practice and the exercise of leadership with colleagues. Charlotte Danielson values the consideration of alternative contributions from colleagues in an attitude of “open-mindedness,” rather than promoting a “full-fledged program” before considering the ideas of others (Danielson, 2006. p. 37).

## Enhancement of Content Knowledge and Pedagogical Skill Through Professional Development within the District

Professional growth and familiarity with research on current best practice is essential to good teaching. Typically, districts offer professional development opportunities designed to refine teachers’ understanding of essential areas of good practice, such as student engagement in learning, grasp of prescribed content, pedagogy, and information technology knowledge. Rock and Wilson (2005), assert that high quality professional development must be sustained in order to improve student learning and teacher instruction. Experienced teachers are equally in need of regular professional development updates. The pace of educational research is such that a gap of only two years may create a void in pedagogical knowledge and indicate a need to attend a workshop at district level. The professional teacher demonstrates familiarity with the latest recommendations on topics such as developmental understanding, implementation strategies, differentiated Instruction, cultural sensitivity, and technology tools, to name a few.

## Staying Current on Content, Best Practices, and Emerging Educational Technologies Through Collegial Support in the School

Structured networking with colleagues provides mutually beneficial learning opportunities in the forms of support and feedback. Participation in learning networks with school colleagues facilitates greater probability of support and sharing. Joint planning and study groups provide job-embedded professional development for teachers to learn from one another.

**Content support and feedback.** Members of a department or team such as science, mathematics, or reading development can provide helpful hints, tips, strategies and resources to answer content-specific questions. This group of teachers may be engaged, as part of a professional learning community, to offer specialist support and feedback. Students are able to gain a deeper subject-matter understanding when teachers are confident and use appropriate pedagogical techniques to deliver content.

**Best practices.** Teachers and support specialists from all grade levels and specialties have much to offer in terms of sharing best practices with school colleagues. Special education colleagues, curriculum and media specialists, administrators and counselors all offer a wealth of knowledge and experience. Every school contains available experts in fields such as differentiated instruction, multiple intelligences, behavior management, collaborative groups, and instructional technology.

**Emerging technologies.** Authentic student learning is promoted with the utilization of technology in the classroom. Many students are adept with multiple formats of digital technology. They communicate with friends and family, exercise critical thinking in game playing, and share artistic creations such as images, music, and video. It is the responsibility of teachers to recognize the opportunities for the positive role that technology can play in learning. The challenge faced is to show students how to utilize technology for more educational-based purposes. Most schools are fortunate to have a few teachers on faculty who are acknowledged to be on the cutting edge of digital technology proficiency and are able to meet students at their technology skill level. These are the teacher-leaders who can provide collegial support and recommend technological techniques that help engage students in the school learning process.

The following list includes a number of relatively established tools and applications that may be available either through the district or independently:

- Twitter
- Glogster
- iPads

- Skype
- Animoto
- Moodle
- Web 2.0 Tools for Teachers
- Digital Storytelling
- Webquests
- Video Conferencing
- Google Apps for Education

**Joint planning.** Sharing of lesson planning with a colleague can be a time saver. Teams of colleagues who teach the same content are able to share responsibility for finding resources, creating activities, and developing strategies. Cross-curricular projects encourage students to explore the interconnection of content in the real world.

**Study groups.** Some school and district initiatives require teachers to create and join study groups to introduce, process, and master the latest and greatest strategies and techniques over an extended period of time. Discussing prior knowledge and experience, or lack thereof, allows teachers to correct misconceptions that they might have and to assuage discomfort. The scope of possible discussion topics is almost limitless. They could include diverse interests such as the pathway to National Board certification, implementation of differentiated instruction, or a strategy to bring a co-teaching model to the school.

**Lesson study.** Rehearsing and role-playing lessons with another teacher may reveal and allow the correction of basic flaws such as transition problems, potential misconceptions, or timing issues. Brainstorming with a professional colleague brings clarity and creativity to the lesson plan. Rock and Wilson (2005) suggest the gathering of a team to partake in the study process and start to form lasting supportive professional relationships to improve instructional practice.



# Showing Professionalism 101

Ideally, a classroom is a model for service to the school and profession. Teachers should work toward putting students as the number one priority. At times, there may be a need to challenge outdated routine practices, long-held assumptions about a certain group of students, or practices that center on the personal convenience of teachers. Student learning should drive teacher conduct, decisions, and individual growth pathways. Honesty, integrity, and professional compliance are keys of professionalism.

## Demonstrating Honesty, Integrity, and Professional Compliance to School and District Policies

Students and parents need to be able to trust teachers. Honesty and integrity are key elements in creating an environment of trust in the classroom. Building relationships on these values will create a classroom culture where students feel free to be open, honest, and unafraid of the risks involved in mastering new content. Teachers who demonstrate a strong moral compass will give students faith to believe that support will be forthcoming in times of need. A teacher's sound reputation with students and colleagues is an indicator of good practice in promoting the interests of students.

Students appreciate hearing the occasional, honest admission from teachers that they don't know the answer to a question. Such a response reinforces the need for lifelong learning and shows respect for the student's question. It is acceptable to not be an expert in everything that is said or done in the classroom. The teaching profession has, for many years, been moving from a didactic to a facilitation model. An honest approach from teachers will encourage students to ask questions and enhance their confidence. Thanking them for listening so carefully that they raised a question can be beneficial too. Sometimes, students refer to topics or technologies that teachers are only moderately familiar with or have never heard of. On these occasions, the student really is the expert. The integration of honesty into the learning process serves to maintain the integrity of the teacher as a leader.

Consistent behavior in following and supporting district policies is an important aspect of professional conduct. Policy intended for teachers may include, for example, teacher daily arrival time, professional dress code, and online gradebook management. Policies intended for students may include, for example, tardiness procedures, student dress code, and Internet acceptable use guidelines. Deference to and implementation of all such policies demonstrates acknowledgement of professional expectations and behavior. Laxity with students, when there is a clear direction that a school has chosen to take, can undermine the essential culture that a school is trying to build and maintain.

Teachers who feel strongly that a particular policy or procedure is outdated or ineffective have the option of seeking change through a professional channel, such as the appropriate school committee. Professional compliance while working to improve policy and procedure is a sign of professionalism. Continuously voicing dislike for particular district or school's mandates, especially in front of students, is unprofessional and does not serve the interests of students.

## Showing that Students' Needs and Best Interest are Paramount in all Decision Making and Classroom Practices

Students' needs extend beyond the classroom and the provision of content-based instruction and support. Students frequently approach teachers with myriad difficulties such as home issues, health problems, relationship disputes, creative differences, or self-defining questions. They may also need a place to voice concern, a letter of recommendation, a local art space, a club sponsor, or athletic advice. Teachers should make themselves knowledgeable about the services provided by counselors and community groups, and seek out resources to provide these needs.

Teachers should advocate for their students and lend them a voice in situations where they have none. Sometimes, intervention may challenge traditional views and the educational establishment. Supporting the rights of students shows dedication to their needs. Teachers have a professional responsibility to challenge policies or practices that are not student-centered. To put students' needs and best interests first, even in the face of difficult, conflicting, or traditional practice, is a sign of true professionalism. Classroom practices and codes should fundamentally and transparently support students.

## Introduction to the Professional Growth Plan

A professional growth plan gives a teacher greater self-awareness and a directional pathway to follow for the next year. A clear focus for growth guides a teacher to plan professional tasks and activities that support progress towards nominated goals. The plan should be centered on a desire to improve instructional practice and better support student learning. Timeframes may vary; some goals may endure for a complete year and others for a semester or quarter. Some typical goals, with associated plans, could include: raising student test scores, increasing communication with parents and community members, creatively engaging students in content-related writing activities, or identifying and addressing gaps in students' prior knowledge and understanding. The possibilities are almost limitless and will depend upon the teacher, the cohort of students and the culture of the school.

Professional growth plans utilize techniques in action research, progress monitoring and data review. Teaching models such as ADDIE (ADDIE instructional design process, 2007) or UbD (McTighe, 2011) can be helpful in all phases of the professional growth plan, including the final evaluation. Journal reading, professional development opportunities and daily reflection are activities that help to create and fulfill professional growth goals. Each school may have a different idea of what a growth plan looks like. The school district may recommend a format to help identify, document, and complete professional growth plans.

Some schools nominate supervisors to check, on a regular basis, that goals are realistically attainable and that teachers are moving towards them. This may include informal classroom observations, professional support and feedback. Sometimes, a group of teachers may benefit from sharing of ideas in regular meetings as they work towards common goals. Discussing progress and asking for collegial advice should be a regular part of the professional growth plan.

## Conclusion

Professional and ethical behaviour should guide teachers as they place students at the center of all planning, decision making, and practice. Honesty, integrity, and professional compliance are key facets of professionalism. Teachers who continue to educate themselves are better able to educate students. Many opportunities for ongoing education are available to teachers. These include professional learning communities, relationships with close colleagues, formal professional development courses, and journals from professional organizations. Finally, the professional growth plan is a powerful aid to focus all of the enriching learning experiences, collegial interactions, and pedagogical tools that a teacher may harness in order to improve the experience and success of students.

## References

- ADDIE instructional design process. (2007). Retrieved February 8, 2013, from Tufts University Web site: <https://wikis.uit.tufts.edu/confluence/display/UITKnowledgebase/ADDIE+Instructional+Design+Process>
- Danielson, C. (2006). *Teacher leadership that strengthens professional practice*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Danielson, C. (2007). *Enhancing professional practice: A framework for teaching* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Honawar, V. (2008). Working smarter by working together. *Education Week*, 27(31), 25–27.
- Hunefeld, R. (2009). When teachers are the experts: How schools can improve professional development. *Education Week*, 29(10), 24–25.
- Jay McTighe & Associates. (2011). *UbD in a nutshell*. Retrieved February 8, 2013, from <http://jaymctighe.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/UbD-in-a-Nutshell.pdf>
- Mednick, A. (2004). Teachers working together to improve instruction [Electronic version]. *Conversations*, 4(2), 1–11.
- Newcomb, A. (2003, May). Peter Senge on organizational learning. Retrieved February 1, 2013, from <http://www.aasa.org/SchoolAdministratorArticle.aspx?id=9192&terms=Peter+Senge+on+Organizational+Learning>
- New York State's curriculum management and standards-based system. (n.d.). NYLearns. Retrieved February 7, 2013, from <http://www.nylearns.org/default.aspx>
- Peterson, K. (1994). Building collaborative cultures: Seeking ways to reshape urban schools. Retrieved February 1, 2013, from <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/educatrs/leadrshp/le0pet.htm>
- Rock, T., & Wilson, C. (2005, Winter). Improving teaching through lesson study. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 77–92.