Peel’s *Growing Success* Monograph Series:  
Rethinking Professional Learning 1-12

“Practice is the visible face of understanding”. Dr. Steven Katz

We now know that successful professional learning, for the most part, involves:

- clear learning goals and success criteria  
- a healthy climate for learning and working, use of norms and developing relational trust among staff  
- a learning stance towards new ideas and an attitude of growth mindset towards student learning  
- a just-in-time response to identified learning needs resulting from thoughtful analysis of school data (needs based)  
- collaborative learning supported by purposeful talk, individual reflection about the learning  
- instructional use of technology to facilitate participation in learning and to sustain ongoing implementation  
- alignment with school, board, and ministry priorities  
- ongoing, iterative inquiry into problems of professional practice  
- job-embedded situations not far from the classroom reality with notable exceptions  
- rigorous joint knowledge creation and sharing  
- productive conflict and diversity of opinion and viewpoints  
- contextualized within processes of collaborative inquiry  
- building teacher capacity over time to meet identified learning needs of students  
- sustainability through networks of professional relationships, relational trust and different forms of leadership  
- investigating evidence-informed practices validated from local and international research  
- regard for social consent (asking and involving participants in choice and creation of professional learning)

If we apply the definition of *learning* used by Dr. Steven Katz as “the process through which experience causes permanent change in knowledge or behaviour”, then we know that new learning is very hard work to do both for staff and students. The characteristic of *permanence* raises the bar for our planning and sustaining ongoing professional learning for and with staff. If we want to bring about permanent change in knowledge or behaviour, we need to give a lot more thought to our learning goals, our activities, our protocols and processes, our follow-up, our monitoring, our feedback and our responsibilities as educational professionals.

There is also the issue of *social consent* or gathering input, consulting and involving those participating in professional learning in the planning, design and providing feedback on the design of sessions. Teacher leadership, autonomy, professional responsibility and individual and collective informed professional judgment play a role in successful professional learning sessions and in sustaining work well beyond professional learning days.
**A Checklist for Designing Professional Learning That Moves Everyone Forward**

**Codes: B=Beginning, O=On the Way, M=Met**

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<th>Considerations</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Practical and Inquiry-Based</strong>— The focus for professional learning is on resolving classroom problems of practice; more time is devoted to problem-identification as indicated by both quantitative/qualitative data sets, including student work on the table as the ‘third point’ for discussion, analysis, moderation etc. The vehicle for changing practice is collaborative inquiry. Learning is also connected to staff Annual Learning Plans and personal staff goal setting.</td>
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<td><strong>Coherent and Aligned</strong>— The focus for learning meets an identified student or teacher learning need. What teachers are learning about will enable them to meet the learning needs of students. Staff are provided with a big picture and know how what they are learning fits into a larger whole or school success goals. Tools are used to make the school focus and goals visual, coherent and understandable by all staff. What staff are learning aligns to the mission, values and vision of the school community. These in turn align with board and ministry objectives. Staff have a common understanding of terms.</td>
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<td><strong>Limited and Scaffolded</strong>— There is an optimal amount of learning for the time limit of the professional learning session and for the year-not too much leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or too little leading to a sense of apathy, boredom or confusion. Learning proceeds in a reasonable step-by-step process over the course of a given year. What needs to wait, needs to wait, what needs attention now, is done now. New learning is structured and scaffolded with various entry points.</td>
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<td><strong>Respectful and Differentiated</strong>— Finding out what staff already know/don’t know- this information is used to inform planning for professional learning. Ensuring different entry points and supports are in place for staff working at different levels of understanding and capacity. The tone used in communicating with staff is always respectful and appreciative, not patronizing or condescending. Ensuring staff have voice and choice in professional learning options and being absolutely clear about the non-negotiables. There is a gradual increase of responsibility to put new learning into practice and to build evidence of implementation/change as seen through observation, conversation and material evidence. Leaving our roles/titles at the door allows us to learn together and be honest.</td>
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<td><strong>Challenging and Collaborative</strong>— Learning goals for staff invite challenge in terms of thinking, use of professional knowledge and skills and the exercise of individual and collective professional judgment. Staff have opportunities to practice collaborative skills with staff with diverse views and opinions, including staff from other schools. Staff move beyond simply swapping stories to true joint knowledge creation and sharing of authentic experiences of supporting students in the classroom.</td>
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<td><strong>Builds Staff Capacity in Self-Regulation</strong>— Staff use a variety of published research-based protocols/strategies to engage each other in thoughtful discussion, dialogue and authentic experiences. Staff are given opportunities to reflect on and make connections in their learning. Staff learn how to plan effective focused conversations, meetings, use facilitation moves and how to disagree respectfully with each other while maintaining a learning stance. Productive disagreement gets real results.</td>
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<td><strong>Models New Instructional Technologies</strong>— Sessions model an appropriate amount of new technologies and invite interactive participation before, during and after the session using technologies and various social media. Technologies facilitate and do not distract from authentic learning.</td>
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<td><strong>Safe and Supportive</strong>— Sessions build community in context and create authentic climate for learning and working are ones where staff feel like they can be themselves as professionals, where they feel that they have adequate time for purposeful and accountable talk and where next steps and follow-up are logical, clear and connected to the bigger picture. Staff grow in confidence over time. Learning is ongoing (not a one-shot deal) and is supported by other professionals inside/outside the school setting. Staff are not taking on too many initiatives at once-choosing depth over breadth.</td>
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<td><strong>Impactful</strong>— There should be evidence that professional learning is leading to permanent changes in teacher behavior and practice and that these changes are leading to growth and real improvement in students as evidenced by both quantitative and qualitative measures. Students are consulted about their perceptions of the impact of ongoing professional learning in the classroom. Teachers should be able to point to evidence of change in classroom and school documents, most importantly, in the improved quality of student work that students are generating. Teachers should also experience feelings of increased efficacy and confidence in the classroom and overall satisfaction. New learning generates new questions, perspectives, hypotheses and thinking about unsolved problems of practice; there would also be an increase in the level of professional curiosity and capacity in the components of informed professional judgement as a result of collaborative professional learning experiences. Professional learning must be seen to and actually impact student learning.</td>
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Professional Learning & School Context - Have we considered?

● Why are we doing this? Our/my purpose?
● Changes in student population/demographics?
● New laws, policies and operating procedures?
● Previous learning (unconsolidated)?
● Level of facilitation skills on staff?
● Past and current staff capacity and expertise?
● Time of year, school calendar, changes to timetable?
● Political or financial situation?
● Staff relationships, dynamics & school culture(s)?
● Significant events at school/in society?
● Federation positions and understandings?
● Teacher/instructional leadership, staff energy levels?
● Available supply teacher/on-call coverage?
● New technologies and social media?
● Staff cynicism about words, language, and spaces?

Why Rethink Professional Learning?

The public’s expectations for teachers as professionals is as high as ever. The amount of new learning available to teachers has increased at an exponential level. Also, differentiated profiles of teachers participating in professional learning has evolved with new demographics. Teachers require differentiated, user-driven approaches with multiple entry points for learning and consolidation. Teachers need opportunities for reciprocal teaching and instructional coaching. Technology and social media allow teachers to have access to high quality professional learning materials in advance, to be able to comment on and respond to that material in real time and participate in purposeful discussion, accountable talk and planning in various ways beyond the face-to-face learning sessions at the school or ballroom. There is also greater public pressure and expectation that the millions of dollars spent every year on professional learning will translate into real growth for our students and lead to permanent, lasting changes in teaching and assessment practice. Teachers are expected to be informed by and apply findings from international research. Researcher John Hattie argues that we have to stop being an “evidence-free” profession and pay closer attention to the greatest influences over learning.

Teachers themselves often have many creative ideas and solutions that are often ever used in professional learning. Unless we are very intentional in involving them in the conversation-this presents as a missed opportunity. We need to take their ideas seriously, put them into practice and strengthen their sense of individual and collective professional responsibility. It is said the person who is working the hardest is learning the most; we want teachers talking more with each other about teaching, about what works, what challenges them and how they might adapt their approaches in order to get different results. Professional learning that facilitates transparent, honest inquiry and conversations about the complexities and realities of teaching, assessment and learning has a much greater chance of moving collective practice forward than simply telling teachers what to do. It is the authenticity of teacher conversations, building relational trust and providing supportive follow up that initiates significant and lasting changes in classroom practice.
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What Matters?

Consider the following questions after a professional learning session:

- What were our key messages, learning goals and success criteria?
- What was emphasized?
- What was not emphasized (but should have been)?
- What feedback did we receive from observation, conversation and products?
- What does evidence of changed teaching practice look like? How do we know?
- What does impact on student learning (growth) look like? How do we know?
- Which barriers remain? How might we deal with resistance?
- What was unintended learning?

Other Models of Professional Learning

- Collaborative Inquiry and Structured Dialogue
- Teacher Moderation and Examination of Student Work
- Learning Circles and Facilitated Book Talks
- Peer Observation and Feedback
- Collaborative Action Research
- Professional Learning Networks
- Department Retreats (secondary)
- Divisional Retreats (elementary)
- Mentoring and Instructional Coaching
- Collaborative Design (curriculum mapping, lesson/unit)
- Study Groups (grade/course or cross-curricular teams)
- Open Space Meetings
- Blogs and Wikis
- Institute or Workshop (provided they involve follow up)

8 Strategies to Enable Professional Learning:

1. Using Protocols
2. Making preconceptions explicit
3. Ensuring that activities and interventions are rooted in problems of practice
4. Recruiting contradictory evidence
5. Viewing mistakes as learning opportunities
6. Encouraging a growth (rather than a fixed) mindset
7. Ensuring that problems of practice are questions that people are curious about
8. Giving people autonomy in time and task

From Intentional Interruption by Dr. Steven Katz and Lisa Ain Dack, p. 9
How Our Minds Get in the Way – Six Barriers to Learning –
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Adapted from Chapter 5, Intentional Interruption – Breaking Down Learning Barriers to Transform Professional Practice by Dr. Steven Katz and Lisa Ain Dack

What follows is a summary of six mental barriers/biases common to all human beings and how being mindful of them can enable professional learning to have the desired impact it was meant to have on practice.

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<th>Context</th>
<th>Learning is the process through which experience causes permanent change in knowledge or behaviour.</th>
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<td>Activity Trap – assuming participation in a protocol/process guarantees real learning has occurred</td>
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<td>Fact: Human beings take mental shortcuts to avoid thinking.</td>
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| We Don’t Think Through All Possibilities | The tendency that people have to commit to decisions or solutions or actions without really unpacking the problem and considering all the possible avenues of approach. Human beings tend not to be particularly good at thinking through all possible angles when considering a problem. We tend to jump to action very quickly, and educators are no exception. Most people don’t spend enough time trying to unpack their “problems of practice” and really understand them prior to committing to a course of action. Most educators are “action people”, who like to feel that they are getting something accomplished and so often take shortcuts in the problem analysis. People often feel as if spending all that time up front is a waste when it could be better used to actually implement a course of action. But interrupting this natural propensity for failing to really understand the problems or challenges at sufficient depth is crucial because it’s the best strategy for avoiding activity traps. |

| We Focus on Confirming Our Hypotheses, Not Challenging Them | This is known as confirmation bias. This refers to the idea that, once people have a hypothesis about something, they tend to look only for things that confirm rather than challenge it. What the confirmation bias essentially shows is that people tend to engage with the world in a way that confirms what they already think, believe, know and do, and work hard to avoid evidence to the contrary. We start with a particular belief or idea and then (subconsciously) look for evidence that confirms it rather than challenges it. This is problematic because the things that challenge current ways of thinking are the ones that often lead to real new learning. When people have a choice, they surround themselves with people who are “like them” and who tell them what they want to hear. And they avoid people (when they have a choice) who challenge them. But without challenge, from people or from artifacts, they can’t really learn. So without change, there is no learning. |

| We Pay Too Much Attention to Things That Are Vivid | This is known as the vividness bias – often referred to as an illusory correlation - the impression that two variables are related when in fact they are not. The vividness bias also plays out in professional learning through what is known as the recognition heuristic, which says that people place greater value on things that they recognize than on things that they don’t. And this sometimes means that they value the wrong things, and, in turn, make poorer decisions than they otherwise might. But how does this apply to professional learning? It applies because educators often place a high value on ideas, strategies, or resources that are well known. We’re not saying that this in and of itself is problematic. The problem arises when teachers and administrators look to particular strategies simply because they’re well known, but not because they’re fit for purpose. They might ignore strategies or resources that are unfamiliar or are more appropriate for their particular problem, purpose or situation. |
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| **We Consider Ourselves to Be Exceptions** | Often called ‘illusory superiority’ bias is that people tend to overestimate their own strengths and underestimate their shortcomings, in comparison to other people. This cognitive bias is itself a mental shortcoming, which is why when people hear about them, they believe they apply to other people and not themselves. People believe that they are exceptions. Illusory superiority impacts on professional learning because it makes people less likely to feel like they “need to know”. It’s not that they don’t want to learn; they often don’t believe that they need to learn anything new, “My practice is fine. I’m not the one who needs to make a change, but other people do.”. People fall into the ‘intelligence trap’—in other words, the more intelligent they are, the more they are able to rationalize how they are the exception and do not fit the rule. |
| **We Hesitate to Take Action in a New Direction** | Most people consider harm that results from the actions they’ve taken to be worse than harm resulting from not taking any action which is called the omission bias. The reason that this bias is so important to understand—and to intentionally interrupt—is because it makes people risk averse. They are so afraid of the potential downside of action that they sometimes choose inaction. What people fail to grasp is that doing nothing is, in fact, doing something. There is no such thing as nothing. Nothing is what they are currently doing; it’s a choice to preserve the status quo. We often see the omission bias at work in the context of professional learning when we work with teachers and administrators to narrow their professional learning foci—to trade breadth for depth. |
| **We Don’t Want Others to See Our Vulnerabilities** | It’s important for most people to appear to others as if they know what they’re doing. We try to maximize our strengths and minimize our weaknesses, and we try to present the strongest version of ourselves to the outside world. This likely has an evolutionary basis, in that strength was linked to survival. As such, most human beings try very hard to avoid others seeing areas in which they might be weak or vulnerable. This can manifest in a number of different ways. First, because they don’t want people to see their weaknesses, they often fail to reach out for help even if they know they need it. In professional learning, this can be described as the imposter syndrome, “I have no idea how I came to be where I am, but hopefully, nobody will find me out.” The net effect is that people keep their questions to themselves and work hard to hide their vulnerabilities (real or imagined). Sometimes this manifests in a stubbornness around “being right” and want to be the one who wins an argument. |

**Additional Resources**

- Collective wisdom and experience of Peel resource staff, teachers, administrators, supervisory officers, 2005-201.
- *Transforming Barriers to Assessment for Learning*, Anne Davies, Sandra Herbst, Beth Parrott-Reynolds, 2008
- Snapshots of Effective Practice – Videos, Dr. Steven Katz – Intentional Interruption, [http://resources.curriculum.org/secretariat/snapshots/katz_interruption.html](http://resources.curriculum.org/secretariat/snapshots/katz_interruption.html)

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