



4. Building effective relationships within CPD processes

This section describes very practical ways of developing professional learning relationships. It will help you to understand and identify key features of seminars and workshops that frame relationships, and provides tips on how to manage the process.

Introduction

Learning for teachers is influenced by relationships with both their fellow learners and their facilitators, just as it is for their pupils. Coaching and mentoring depend on, and provide explicit structures for, building good, professional learning relationships. So when you are helping colleagues develop coaching and mentoring skills you can expect relationships to be important to people. This section is designed to help you plan for this.

What can a CPD leader do?

There are lots of things that CPD leaders/facilitators can do to set a positive context for professional learning relationships. Many of them model the strategies colleagues may already be using to support effective relationships between teachers and pupils. You might like to start by identifying the characteristics of effective professional learning relationships in group settings and agreeing ground rules, just as you might do with your pupils. You could:

- get colleagues to remember the group learning occasion that has been most useful for their learning;
- brainstorm the characteristics of the behaviours of group members that contributed to the success in pairs, then compile a group list;
- repeat the exercise to identify:
 - the behaviours facilitators used that were helpful;
 - the things they did as learners that were important - to emphasise their capacity to enhance their own learning; and
- use the three lists to agree ground rules for how people will behave towards each other in CPD sessions.

Practical ways of enhancing professional learning relationships

Learning can be scary. When we learn about things we do every day and that we have routinised, it also often means 'unlearning' some ingrained habits - which is often very uncomfortable. Here are seven things that can be reassuring to people participating in group based professional learning:

- telling people you're delighted to work and learn with them. Enthusiasm is infectious, rather like a yawn or even a giggle. So is anxiety. If you look apprehensive rather than interested and excited by what is to come, your anxiety will communicate itself. After all, you do know what the plans are for the CPD session. So focus on what you are pleased about and communicate that at the start and at the end of every session;



- the sound of your own name used appreciatively. Feeling invisible or misunderstood interferes with learning. When you facilitate the learning of people you meet every day it's easy to fall into the shorthand 'you'. Using people's personal names and linking this to acknowledgement of their point of view or a contribution they have made, will help people feel heard and thus be more open;
- investigating what people think they will bring to a professional learning session and what they want from it. Just asking the questions will help people identify their own starting points and make them feel you are interested in their learning. It will also give you a window into what they are looking for. Collect such information - and don't forget to use it and show them you've used it;
- constructing activities so there is a degree of choice about who they work with - or if that isn't possible, when



Big Bear was too dogmatic, and Middle Bear was too nervous, but me and Baby Bear, we worked together just right!



they will work with particular people. The more small choices you offer (within an overall, carefully thought through, table d'hote menu) the more people will use each other to personalise their learning and develop a sense of ownership;

- work the room. Even up-for-anything learners have tough days. Trying to have even very brief personal conversations with individuals during pre-event refreshments gives you a strong sense of people's mood and enables you to relate to them as a group of individuals rather than see them as an undifferentiated group. Sitting in on group activities in rotation helps with this too. So does organising group activities with card and visual displays that can give you clues from a distance about other groups or individuals who are struggling (there are plenty of these in the packs);
- help people feel safe. CPD sessions, like classrooms, can look positive, calm and orderly on the surface, but be experienced by colleagues as unsafe if they feel that one or two negative opinion leaders might 'pick them off' and belittle their contributions in the staffroom the next day. So you can use group feedback to ensure everyone's voice is heard. You can use post-its to anonymise feedback or take one point from pairs or tables in turn to help with this. Everyone needs to feel that you have strategies for managing disruptive learners in CPD workshops.
- divergent perspectives can be really important. Make sure you signify that you are interested in a range of perspectives - but also focused on delivering the goals of a planned session. If you have colleagues who offer a dissenting voice and you find this uncomfortable or threatening, find another colleague to co-coach or specialist coach you in exploring all the options you have for responding. Alternatively you could offer to partner challenging colleagues as a co-coach - the structure of the relationship will provide support and the process will give you an important window into divergent thinking.
- you could also try recruiting the group as a whole to develop shared approaches to creating a positive learning environment that recognises and accommodates a range of perspectives but remains purposeful. You don't have to be perfect in tackling problems - but you do have to look like you care about them and make serious professional efforts to have back-up or follow-up strategies;
- building on strengths. Because relationships matter - and can be hard to manage when people are taking risks - it's important to notice potential strengths; things that will help you feel confident about building positive attitudes. In developing mentoring and coaching in schools these usually include:

- teachers' interest in learning;
- teachers' curiosity about and concern for their pupils' development;
- teachers' skills in facilitating learning in a different context;
- a one to one learning environment for a significant element of time;
- the fact that everybody involved will be learning reciprocally - this speeds up the process of building up the trust needed for people to take risks;
- the fact that mentoring and coaching celebrate and build on colleagues' existing skills; and
- the fact that mentoring and coaching are about personalising learning and keeping it close to colleagues' everyday experiences and challenges.

What assets exist in your own context that you would like to add to this list? For example, do performance management arrangements or local partnerships provide a springboard?

Spotting obstacles and overcoming them

Identifying potential obstacles can help with planning too. The challenges you will face will be particular to the group of people you are working with. You might want to work with a co-coach to identify likely obstacles and strategies for addressing them or carry out a mini enquiry - forewarned is forearmed.



The challenges you discover may include cynicism born of previous experiences of undifferentiated CPD activities. There might be defensiveness arising from experiencing CPD as a remedial activity. Because the received model of CPD for many years has focused on courses and keynote lectures, which assumed everyone involved had the same starting point, CPD can be mistaken for just being 'talked at'. Mentoring and coaching offer ways of personalising learning so should help you overcome concerns like this.

Learning means taking risks which always generates anxiety - often manifested as resistant or cynical attitudes to new ideas, especially in group settings, fear about looking silly or making mistakes in public. Such concerns are especially hard for people who interpret the role of teacher as being an expert rather than as a mix of offering expertise and modelling learning. One school gets round this very effectively by promoting "interesting risks or mistakes of the day" - actually they use a more colloquial phrase for mistakes.



The other set of concerns that affect relationships within CPD are those which relate to the boundaries between accountability systems and professional learning. Without clearly mapped boundaries - as well as connections - between CPD and performance management, colleagues may be concerned that risks they take in CPD sessions might somehow be used as evidence to their disadvantage in other settings. Three things to remember about mentoring and coaching that really help with this:

- mentoring and coaching skills are precisely the skills that help performance management conversations go well;
- learning agreements for coaching and mentoring help everyone involved set appropriate boundaries to the relationship too; and
- what is more, the processes help colleagues translate targets that are performance oriented into targets they are interested in because they are related to their students' learning - see the **Joining Up** pack for an activity illustrating this in practice.

