The work of PLD facilitators

Jenny Whatman and Ally Bull

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New Zealand Council for Educational Research
P O Box 3237
Wellington
New Zealand

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Contents

Introduction....5

PLD facilitation and working conditions....5

The new facilitation environment....8

Facilitators' experiences of the PLD environment....10

Maintaining professional identity....12

A missed opportunity?....13

References....14

Appendix 1: The research approach....14

Introduction

In this paper we explore the work of professional learning and development (PLD) facilitators working in New Zealand schools under Ministry of Education (Ministry) contracts. The authors work for the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) which is one of five members of a consortium under the organisational name Te Toi Tupu. NZCER's role is to provide evaluation expertise across the consortium and within projects.[1]

The project that contributes to this paper is funded by the purchase agreement with the Ministry. The authors have undertaken the study as "participant observers"—both inside and outside Te Toi Tupu—and as such were careful to differentiate their evaluation and research roles. Our research approach is outlined in Appendix 1. The focus of the project was the work that PLD facilitators do. Our interests in PLD facilitators' work were sparked by previous experiences as pre-service teacher educators, by our knowledge of adult development theory, and by our ongoing research into teachers' lives and work.

In this paper we do two things. Firstly, we describe PLD facilitation work, highlighting the way in which it is distinctly different from that of school teaching, though this is the background from which most facilitators come. Our purpose is to examine the extent to which facilitators are prepared for their roles and the extent to which they are enabled to be effective as facilitators. We use the experiences of three Te Toi Tupu facilitators working in English-medium contracts across New Zealand to illustrate this section of the paper. The second part of this paper examines the impacts of recent and changing requirements on facilitators and comments on how PLD could be designed with a view to future purpose. As researchers who are also involved in the PLD contracts, we can see that the messiness and complexity of facilitation work is compounded by external demands, as, indeed, most jobs are.

PLD facilitation and working conditions

Facilitators working within Ministry of Education contracts provide PLD services to schools to help them better meet the requirements of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (*NZC*) (Ministry of Education, 2007) and other government priorities in education. They may work with school leaders and/or teachers, one-on-one and in groups, helping them improve practice to better support students' achievement.

Almost all PLD facilitators in Te Toi Tupu have been appointed to their roles from school teaching and/or leadership jobs in schools.[2] Most of them have retained their registered teacher

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[1] Ally is also a PLD facilitator.

[2] Our knowledge of facilitator employment is confined to Te Toi Tupu. It is highly likely that PLD facilitators employed by other providers have also been from school teaching and/or leadership jobs.

status and consider that the knowledge and skills gained as a teacher are valuable underpinnings for their roles as facilitators. However, there are many factors that make teaching and PLD facilitation different from each other. Not only do facilitators need to be deeply familiar with teaching and learning in schooling, they also need to understand how adults learn and how to lead adult learning. Facilitators need to be able to draw on strong curriculum and pedagogical knowledge as well as theories of adult development.

Superficially, the teaching knowledge and related skill base of facilitators looks very similar to that of a school leader. Like a school leader, facilitators must contend with the complex demands and interests of different groups of people. However, facilitators must also contend with these demands in an overall working context that is quite different from being employed in any one school. This can make it very challenging to develop and maintain a professional identity that can connect with, and support, teachers and school leaders.

In most teaching jobs, time is controlled by established parameters such as allocated days and hours for a school year, by timetables, and by school policies and procedures. Facilitators need to create and maintain the structure of their working lives and to take responsibility for their own work programme—managing their schedules, their places of work, when and where they will interact with people, and often which parts of their work they will do when. Many of them travel long distances each week and work with many different teachers and leaders either online or face-to-face. Their place of work is their home, their car, meeting rooms and workshop spaces in hotels and schools, and occasional time at their employing organisation's place of work. For many of them, particularly those working in contracts with few and widespread facilitators, professional isolation is a reality despite online access to their colleagues. Some facilitators welcome this flexibility. Others crave the collegiality that comes with working in a school where the students and the particular school context provide unity of purpose. In other words, the daily preoccupations of facilitators are also different from those of teachers. Facilitators are primarily concerned with influencing adults' pedagogical thinking and actions in a range of schools; teachers are primarily concerned with improving the progress of the students in their classrooms.

Three of the facilitators[3] interviewed and observed for this project discuss the nature of these challenges in the following paragraphs.

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[3] All names are pseudonyms.

Science facilitator (primary school)

Melanie is a new facilitator. None of the schools she works in are within close travelling distance of her home so she tends to alternate weeks of being on the road and being at home. When on the road, Melanie tries to fit in as much contact time with her schools as possible. This involves running staff or syndicate meetings, helping with planning, observing in classes, and sometimes "modelling" for teachers. During her weeks at home, she finds resources for schools, catches up on professional reading, and plans for the next "in school" sessions. Melanie's journal during her first year of being a facilitator reveals her thoughts about the work context and new challenges:

January: "In my previous job…I was quite happy to plough ahead, plan what I think should be done, make suggestions, listen, work alongside. [Now] the pressure comes from representing another organisation instead of myself. I am not clear what the expectations and/or ways of being that will promote their mission are."

February: "[I used to be] focused on how to work with students to make science relevant and interesting. Now I need to not only hold that but also to hold all the things that teachers need to understand (and likely that will include things that are different from what I need to understand)."

April: "How do I help by supplying enough breadth as to not overwhelm, enough direction without dictating, and enough examples without pigeon holing the idea?"

New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) facilitator

Gillian has been a facilitator for many years. While she is confident that she has the knowledge and skills to work effectively in a range of contexts, she constantly reflects on her own practice and the way she interacts with others. Gillian has an office but travels widely in the North Island and so works a lot from home, the car, and temporary accommodation.

"I'm in control of my life, I tell myself all the time, I'm in control of my diary. My calendar, where I'm going, when I'm going...sometimes it gets really pressured. But because I'm focused on meeting with leaders in schools and teachers, I often find myself at 10 o'clock at night doing my emails, checking my emails and responding. So from a work life balance perspective I haven't quite got there."

"I guess being a critical friend is in the not allowing things to just sit but to actually pose those questions that might be hard questions. I think a facilitator needs to know the right question to ask. It's like walking in the other person's shoes."

"It's supporting others to follow, try, go... Maybe helping them with some skills which I do know something about, knowing the right place to go for it. Coaching is about having a set of skills that enable you to help others to develop those skills through modelling, showing, sharing and being explicit about what those skills are when you're showing them, when you're using them. [As a faciliator] you're highly self critical, highly reflective... You need to be careful not to over-analyse and to be able to step back. I have to make sure that...I don't slip in to judging people."

Learning with Digital Technologies (LwDT) facilitator

Andrea works online and from home. Her work times are flexible. She often starts her working day at 8.00 am, takes time off for exercise or gardening in the middle of the day, and finishes work in the evening. She tries not to do facilitation work in the weekends although other members of her team do. She said: "I really started to think about the role of a facilitator...and how the context(s) in which I work (and have worked previously) might shape the aspects of that role. I'd never really reflected on the fact, for example, that working from home might shape me as a facilitator..."

Andrea thinks that "a good facilitator will be able to go in to a situation, whether it's virtual or face-to-face and basically guide from behind or the side, make people feel comfortable so that they can share their experiences and that the facilitator will actively listen and take note".

Andrea considers that it is important to maintain a strong professional academic profile. "I think it's actually a part of being a facilitator. It's not just knowing what's happening; it's knowing some of the elements that might explain why it's happening. I do think that writing up of papers and the academic rigour behind that makes me think more critically about what I'm doing."

"...[your ideas don't] all have to be spot on before you put it out there and in fact putting something out there that's a little bit tatty round the edges can actually be really good because it empowers other people to jump in and change things or own some of it... I've learned that along the way."

The new facilitation environment

The day-to-day facilitator work context is underpinned by an overall professional learning and development environment which has been through frequent significant change. In particular, the *purposes* of facilitators' work have shifted dramatically in recent years. In the past those providing PLD were usually known as *advisers* and worked with schools that invited them to *advise* them. Advisers' work was perceived as being codified in terms of *outputs* and accountability to the Ministry in relation to hours spent delivering an output. Advising often consisted of demonstrations of practice with invitations to teachers and leaders to try out what the adviser had modelled. Teachers and leaders were in effect *apprenticed* to advisers (Timperley, 2011). Prior to 2011, PLD was provided largely by the School Support Services arms of the universities and colleges of education that had traditionally offered initial teacher education. So while advisers often worked individually with schools, they had close professional contact and shared office space with a team of other advisers.

Government requirements for PLD provision through School Support Services in New Zealand had been introduced gradually over a period of about 10 years. In 2007, a 3-year evaluation of PLD provision was "initiated to better understand aspects of the current system that work or do not work with a view to informing Ministry decisions and considerations about future professional development provision" (Sankar & Chauvel, 2011, p. 1). Prior to the publication of the report in 2010, the Ministry had begun to make changes to the contractual arrangements it had with

universities and to its own structures, to shift PLD provision to schools where Ministry and Education Review Office data indicated there was a need and to provide more joined-up, whole-school PLD. Universities had begun to change their requirements of advisers and the ways they recruited, employed, and deployed them to better suit these changes.

From 2011, PLD delivery was opened up to a range of providers (not only universities) to deliver regional and national PLD on behalf of the Ministry. Many of these providers were consortia of organisations. PLD was delivered by *facilitators.* The changes engendered by the 2007–10 evaluation of PLD services were formalised, with significant changes including: the increased role of the regional ministry offices and the expectations for milestone reporting against improved student outcomes.

One of the consequences of the changes to PLD delivery has been day-to-day *professional isolation* for some facilitators, especially those in smaller contracts or in contracts that are geographically spread. In School Support Services contracts advisers/facilitators worked as part of a team, sharing office spaces and resources, often working with colleagues in particular schools, and undertaking their own PLD as a team. Schools invited advisers/facilitators to support them in the school's focus for the year. Provision was regional and university providers, schools, and regional Ministry offices and ERO teams were aware of the strengths and needs of the region.

Providers of PLD in the new environment recognised the challenges that would face teams and individual facilitators and began by setting up processes and systems to connect facilitators and projects across the country. By 2013, Te Toi Tupu had in place a range of PLD and induction strategies including an induction package; an annual hui designed to share and build knowledge of the work; and a thriving online community with extensive resources, including webinars focused on helping facilitators become familiar with Ministry priorities. Individual projects also refined processes to support facilitators.

Despite this, providing ongoing support can be challenging, partly because of the geographical isolation of some facilitators and partly because workload demands make professional growth difficult to seek and/or pursue. This has meant that there are challenges for some new facilitators as they work to define their role, particularly when there is so much to learn about reporting requirements (in effect, collecting and analysing a range of data) and about organisational systems and processes. In some cases there are challenges also in initially working productively in the allocated schools. It is the Ministry regional offices that determine which schools should receive PLD—according to the data they have. Previously, schools volunteered to take part in PLD projects and often arranged for their local PLD providers to offer tailored support in a particular curriculum area which was the school's focus for the year. With the exception of primary science, NAPP (National Aspiring Principals), GATE (Gifted and Talented Education), and LwDT (Learning with Digital Technologies), facilitators in the main are working in schools that are deemed to be "failing" or in need of external support. These schools may have facilitators from a number of different contracts (and organisations) working in them. Facilitators often have to work

in unfamiliar and even hostile environments in regions where they are not well known and where potentially they are isolated from colleagues and their own professional support networks.

Our research found that even experienced facilitators who are familiar with the general nature of the work still have to deal with different organisational arrangements and with different accountabilities and reporting requirements. Whilst they are likely to spend their day doing familiar things, they are doing them for different purposes and often in very different contexts. For example the change of focus in the PLD often means facilitators working in schools where the Ministry directs them to go because the school is not demonstrating that it is making enough difference to student achievement in literacy and numeracy, especially for priority learners.[4] It means collecting data on literacy and numeracy regardless of the contract under which the facilitator works. It means working with the school leadership as well as with teachers.

Even for those facilitators who are highly experienced, who are not isolated, who are working in regions where they are well known, and who flourish in flexible environments and multiple contexts, the complex accountability requirements for many are demanding and possibly counter-productive. Facilitators are accountable to teachers and leaders in schools, to their project leaders and the management group in Te Toi Tupu, to the Ministry of Education. Ultimately, they are held accountable for raising the achievement of Māori and Pasifika learners and learners with special educational needs. This constant balance between flexibility and accountability is one of the most difficult aspects of the job. To take account of the developmental nature of PLD provision, there are many changes to continue to absorb: new PLD contracts; new organisations, structures, and contacts with whom to establish relationships; new data collection requests; and different reporting requirements. An added problem with the focus on student achievement is that in some contracts (primary science for instance) there is currently no agreed way to meaningfully measure achievement.

Facilitators' experiences of the PLD environment

When initially exploring facilitators' work for this project, we had thought there would be many similarities between jobs that facilitators do, regardless of the contracts they worked in. However, the data we collected suggested that facilitators experience the job differently even though they are expected to work towards and report on the same outcomes. So we began to see that facilitators in Te Toi Tupu belonged to three different groups depending on the contract in which they worked. We were struck, for example, by the differences in purpose and approach within the primary science and maths contracts. The different groups we identified are:

1. contracts that are highly structured and programmatic (for example, mathematics and literacy). In mathematics and literacy, student achievement can be measured via robust standardised tests and considerable investment has been made in designing curriculum

[4] The Ministry now defines priority learner groups as: Māori and Pasifika learners and learners with special education learning needs, and learners from low socioeconomic communities.

and assessment resources. Facilitators' purposes are to raise student achievement in mathematics or literacy through improving teachers' and leaders' skills and knowledge. Reporting to the Ministry on progress made in individual schools is relatively straightforward. There are a number of facilitators working in regional organisational offices so that collegiality and support are readily available and new facilitators can work alongside their experienced colleagues to "learn the ropes"

2. contracts where the work is much more loosely defined and where facilitators must find out the specific school needs and then develop a PLD plan based on these specific needs. Thus a facilitator may be working in very different ways in each school. Science, GATE, *NZC*, and Leadership and Assessment can be included in this group. Facilitators often work across a number of these contracts as they do not employ many facilitators and a full-time position must often be split geographically. PLD support for newer facilitators is harder to maintain than in the larger contracts such as mathematics. Unlike other contracts, schools that have a school-wide focus on science and GATE negotiate with the Ministry to have PLD facilitators to work with them. Whilst this means that, theoretically, facilitators are welcomed by schools, in fact it took a long time at the beginning of these contracts for schools to recognise that this support was available. This created contractual difficulties and made facilitators' work very fragmented initially

3. other contracts that don't fit neatly into those groups: facilitators in this third group work with individuals as much as schools and are likely to spend most of their time online rather than face-to-face (for example, LwDT and National Aspiring Principals (NAPP)). Whilst these are large contracts with numbers of facilitators, the predominantly online facilitation environment creates its own challenges, especially for new facilitators.

Despite their differences, all contracts must report to the Ministry three times a year showing progress on improving the stated contract-specific outcomes as well as the same five outcomes and answering the same following overarching questions:

1. *The New Zealand Curriculum*: To what extent and how well are schools implementing an inclusive and empowering curriculum?
2. Priority learners: How well is the wider school environment and school-based curriculum supporting shifts in the priority groups of learners' achievement and outcomes?
3. Quality Teaching: How are school principals and teachers using evidence of what works to inform their improvement actions? How does teaching as inquiry, and the use of data, inform and guide teaching practice to achieve desired learning outcomes for all learners? How many schools are using Tataiako?
4. Leadership: How well and to what extent do leaders demonstrate effective pedagogical leadership, and goal setting and evaluative capabilities?

5. Learning with Digital Technologies: How well and to what extent are school leaders and teachers integrating LwDT to optimise learner outcomes?

This is not a random list of requirements and none of these focuses is in itself surprising. However, the facilitator's primary purpose is to deliver contract-specific PLD in accordance with the school's needs and expectations. They collect, analyse, and report on contract-specific outcomes. The Ministry, though, also requires the facilitator to also collect data on literacy and numeracy, and the overall "health" of the school in relation to the focuses outlined above. It is not surprising that some schools have resisted facilitators' requests for data that may appear unrelated to the task at hand. Not only do schools see this as being different from the facilitators' primary purpose, many are also likely to feel that they are being unreasonably scrutinised and judged. It is the facilitator who bears the brunt of this unease.

Maintaining professional identity

The brief accounts of three facilitators and their work that we included earlier describe the importance of the facilitator being able to critically reflect on and learn from their experiences, and from professional readings, research, and development. They also value sharing professional learning with colleagues. These things help develop and maintain a facilitator's professional identity. Maintaining professional identity is vital in a rapidly changing environment. Having a strong sense of self within a collegial, purposeful team enables facilitators to learn and improve their practice. This in turn provides the credibility they need to work effectively with teachers. A confident and effective facilitator will have strategies to counter the professional isolation we described earlier.

The challenges we have described for new and experienced facilitators are mainly structural. However, they impact at an individual level. A facilitator can be open to criticism from teachers and leaders in schools for situations that are not of their making. Professional isolation, uncertainty about role, being sent to schools that may at best be unsupportive and at worst hostile, having to collect data seemingly unrelated to their PLD focus—these all mean that some facilitators are more vulnerable than they used to be (or ought to be) even though the problems are really structural. While Te Toi Tupu has much in place to support the work of teams and individuals, facilitators deal with multiple demands on a day-to-day basis. Consider, for example, the impact on a facilitator's work when they are required to plan, implement, and report on their current assigned schools and school personnel whilst at the same time asked to contribute to writing new proposals for PLD contracts for the coming year.

These challenges are compounded by a lack of a career structure within facilitation. The first round of PLD contracts was for 3 years, the second round for 2 years, and in 2014 it was for 1 year only. Having shorter and shorter contract lengths makes it difficult to build the capability and capacity of facilitators and to establish a meaningful career structure for them. Professional dimensions developed by Te Toi Tupu for use in appraisal emphasise the Registered Teacher Criteria (RTC). This is because facilitators need to understand what teachers are required to

demonstrate so that they in turn can facilitate teacher learning. The emphasis on RTC also enables facilitators to maintain their own ability to move back into teaching in the school sector which many do. However, the RTC are not focused on *adult* learning or on managing adult learning contexts and so provide narrow indicators of the criteria needed for effective facilitation. In effect, the professional dimensions could be seen as a metaphor for the balancing act that must be maintained by facilitators: on the one hand they must learn new skills and work in different ways to that of teachers whilst on the other hand they must retain their teaching knowledge and skills as they may need or wish to return to teaching in the short or long term.

A missed opportunity?

We have argued that PLD facilitation is different from and even more complex than the teaching jobs for which most facilitators were trained. We have suggested that the environments that facilitators find themselves in are often challenging and that sometimes facilitators, especially those new to the role, may lack the professional support needed to carry out their roles effectively. We have indicated that facilitators in some contracts, and all new facilitators, may face considerable difficulty in fulfilling all their work responsibilities. In addition, facilitators in many contracts are required to collect data, carry out evaluative analysis, and report on outcomes related to their project-specific outcomes, as well as to collect data related to more general Ministry requirements. We could be seen to be painting rather a bleak picture, despite the fact that experienced facilitators in our study often talked about those aspects of their work that gave them great pleasure. Our research suggests, however, that facilitators' working lives have become more constrained by the requirements of their job and are now more complex because of multiple and competing demands.

The facilitators who were part of our study and their colleagues are committed professionals, actively engaged in improving the facilitation work that they do and the teachers and schools with whom they work. There do appear to be many challenges for them in the expectations of how and why they will carry out their facilitation roles, particularly in relation to their accountability for student progress, regardless of the contract within which they work.

There are challenges too that are currently not fully addressed. In relation to the Ministry's overarching questions of PLD providers, we need to strengthen the way schools implement an inclusive and empowering curriculum. To achieve this outcome, more attention needs to be given at a national level to facilitators' work that seeks to prepare teachers to fulfil *NZC*'s vision of developing "Young people who will be confident, connected, actively involved lifelong learners" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 7).

A focus such as this puts new demands on teachers and leaders as well as on the PLD facilitators. Do teachers have the dispositions and capabilities themselves that they are required to develop in their students—given that their own schooling was not explicitly designed to develop these? What new dispositions and capabilities might PLD facilitators need to meet the changing needs of teachers and students?

Being able to provide this type of PLD obviously requires significant expertise. The uncertainty and fragmentation of PLD provision within the current context does not seem conducive to the development of this kind of deep expertise. Clear recognition that facilitation of PLD is a specialised profession in its own right, along with strategies to grow capacity within the profession, would be a useful starting points for improving outcomes for New Zealand students.

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Appendix 1: The research approach

We took two different approaches to collecting data about the nature of facilitators' work. The first approach was an ethnographic one. Jenny followed three different, experienced facilitators, spending 1 or 2 days with each between March and June 2012. Jenny observed their work as they went about their days, participating in meetings at schools and online. She recorded and transcribed the discussions between facilitators and teachers, and took field notes about activities, the nature of discussions, and points at which facilitators made professional decisions. Jenny also interviewed the three facilitators about their backgrounds and experience, and perspectives on their work, including what made facilitation successful. Two of the facilitators made extensive use of the interview data as part of their ongoing inquiry and appraisal documentation and maintained an ongoing dialogue with Jenny, providing new insights into their jobs as they arose. Excerpts from the fieldwork were collated and published as "Poems of facilitators' work" in 2013.

A year later Jenny re-interviewed by phone two of the three facilitators plus another experienced facilitator who had expressed interest in being part of the original study. The interview questions were the same as those Ally asked science and mathematics facilitators, as described in the following paragraphs.

During September 2013, Ally interviewed by phone six Te Toi Tupu primary science PLD facilitators and four primary maths PLD facilitators. The interviews were to find out about the work the facilitators do, how they experienced their jobs, the range of activities they had been

involved with over the last few weeks—and the purposes for these activities, the skills, dispositions, knowledge facilitators need, and what supports had been provided in learning to work as a facilitator and what challenges they had experienced.