

SUPPORT IN CYBERSPACE –NEW INITIATIVES FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

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“Teachers are committed to the continuous development of their professional knowledge and practice. They work collaboratively, using research and evidence derived from theory and practice, to improve education and build effective communities of learners.”

(VIT, (2003) Standards of Professional Practice)

Abstract

The use of professional standards for registration and regulation has become an accepted part of the landscape in the teaching profession, both nationally and internationally. Standards are used to not only enable teachers to enter the profession but to also maintain a presence in the profession. In Victoria registered teachers are required to demonstrate that they have maintained their professional practice as part of renewing their registration. This means that they must have taught for at least fifty days and undertaken at least one hundred hours of standards referenced professional development activities in the previous five years. An initiative introduced in 2008 has provided specific support for teachers who need to identify professional development opportunities that reference standards of professional practice.

This paper discusses the development of Pdi, a search engine of professional development courses and activities developed by the Victorian Institute of Teaching. It outlines the importance of all teachers having centralised access to professional development activities and the value of quality assurance mechanisms to ensure all activities and courses teachers find on Pdi reference standards of professional practice and principles of effective professional learning. It also considers the value of Pdi in supporting the education of providers on the specific learning needs of teachers.

Introduction

Pdi is a search engine for teachers (<http://pdi.vic.edu.au>), which allows sophisticated searching of a large and growing database of accredited professional development activities. At the time of writing approximately two thousand activities have been included in the database encompassing a diverse range of teacher professional development programs. Teachers can search for activities using key words, topics, provider name, type of activity, course or service.

This database only contains accredited programs that have been rigorously scrutinized in respect to the *Standards of Professional Practice* and the *Principles of Effective Professional Learning* (PEPs). (*Refer later in the paper*) The Institute outsources the process for the quality assurance of each program to the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), which works with each provider to insure quality of content and process. ACER undertakes interviews with providers to ensure quality and gain feedback every six months, referred to as “the Qads”.

The Pdi Website is designed to assist the Institute in addressing some of its key responsibilities. These include a number of the core functions of the VIT, identified in section 2.6.3 of the Education and Training Reform Act 2006.

- Develop, establish and maintain standards of professional practice for entry into the teaching profession and for continuing membership of the profession
- Develop and maintain a professional learning framework to support and promote the continuing education and professional development of teachers
- Undertake the professional development programs and activities in relation to the functions of the Institute

Further resources and support provided on the Pdi Website include reading groups, reading lists, plus a conference list and a news sheet which have all added to the appeal of the site, and its increased usage.

History

Teacher re-registration in Victoria first occurred in 2007 when seventy seven thousand Victorian teachers renewed their registration. Although not in place at the time, it was made clear that maintenance of professional practice would require a quantum of professional development to have occurred during a period leading up to renewal. The first renewal process to include a professional development component was in 2008.

The Institute launched the Pdi Website in the same year as a tool to support teachers with access to professional development programs and to provide further support in maintaining an appropriate level of professional development for renewal of registration. Initial research conducted with teacher focus groups during 2006 indicated teachers thought there was little to no information available to them individually regarding professional development and professional development opportunities. 1004 from 1130 survey responses suggested that curriculum professional development and 1000 responses suggested professional practice were most important and what should be the focus of Pdi, allowing individual searching and sourcing of information. The same focus group research also clearly showed that teachers strongly favored being able to find this information on one online site and having information about the quality of professional development from a trusted source.

The case for Pdi was further developed when following the renewal of the 78,000 teachers, more than 10% were identified as casual relief and emergency teachers, who did not have the same access to professional development as teachers in schools and other workplaces.

It was envisaged that access to and searching on the Pdi site would provide teachers with accredited, extensive and accurate information as they realized the need to keep records of appropriate professional development. The Victorian Government legislation that brought the institute into existence states that teachers need to provide evidence that they have maintained an appropriate level of professional development in the proceeding five years of their teaching.

The Provider and Pdi

The focus group research mentioned earlier (2006) highlighted the need for teachers to be confident that providers on Pdi were knowledgeable, professional in their approach and relevant with content and activities. For this reason Pdi course registration was developed with a five level quality assurance process:

1. Accuracy of detail and bon fides of providers
2. Identification and reference to each of the eight standards
3. A declaration to how each program references each of the nine principles of effective practice
4. Quality assurance discussions (*Qads*) with a sample of providers
5. Researched based on-line evaluation of programs.

ACER and Institute staff have reported that the *Qads* are extremely beneficial for all parties and that data collected is extremely important for the ongoing development of Pdi and the new MiPdi (*refer p.3*). Feedback has also shown that professional development providers have recognized and had confirmed that success in their 'business' is directly related to teacher requirements, especially in the area of relevance to specific learning needs. (VIT/ACER, *Qads* (2008 No 1, page 5)

The Standards and the Principles.

The Institute uses the Standards for the Renewal of Registration (VIT, 2003) and the Principals for Effective Professional Learning (NPEAT: National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, 2000) as the foundation for identifying and developing guiding principles/guidelines/checklists for quality professional development. Providers who register on the Pdi site answer a series of questions/checklists to ensure their professional development offerings are related to the Standards and the Principles.

Providers have reported (VIT/ACER, *Qads*, (2009) No 1 page 4, No 2 page 6) that as they further develop their understandings of the Standards and Principles, preparation for their professional development content and presentations has been positively influenced by Pdi requirements.

The Standards for Renewal of Professional practice are (8):

- Teachers know how students learn and how to teach them effectively
- Teachers know the content they teach

- Teachers know their students
- Teachers plan and assess for effective learning
- Teachers create and maintain safe and challenging learning environments
- Teachers use a range of teaching practices and resources to engage students in effective learning
- Teachers reflect on, evaluate and improve their professional knowledge and practice
- Teachers are active members of their profession

(VIT, 2003)

The Principals for Effective Professional Learning are (9):

- The content of professional learning focuses on what students are to learn and how to address the different problems students may have in learning the material.
- Professional learning should be based on analyses of the differences between (a) actual student performance and (b) goals and standards for student learning.
- Professional learning should involve teachers in the identification of what they need to learn and in the development of the learning experiences in which they will be involved.
- Professional learning should be primarily school-based and built into the day-to-day work of teaching.
- Professional learning should be organised around collaborative problem solving.
- Professional learning should be continuous and on going, involving follow-up and support for further learning-including support from sources external to the school that can provide necessary resources and new perspectives.
- Professional learning should incorporate evaluation of multiple sources of information on (a) outcomes for students and (b) the instruction and other processes that are involved in implementing the lessons learned through professional learning.
- Professional learning should provide opportunities to gain an understanding of the theory underlying the knowledge and skills being learned.
- Professional learning should be connected to a comprehensive change process focused on improving student learning.

(Hawley, W. D., & Valli, L., 1999. NPEAT, 2000)

Pdi statistical data

The Pdi Website can be separated into two components for statistical analysis. One, the entire site, and two, the search engine component of the site. The Website contains data collection modules associated with the dynamic pages of the site to provide comprehensive statistical analysis.

The table below shows the average simple hits to the Pdi site, identified by semester. A hit, in this context, is a successful request to the web server from a visitor's browser for any type of file, whether an image, HTML page, an MP3 file, or any other type. It is important to note that a single web page can cause many hits -- one for each image included on the page, etc.

Date	Average daily hits
1 July - 31 December 2008	2667
1 January – 30 June 2009	2882
1 July – 26 November 2009	7155

The following table provides a more realistic insight to what is happening on the site as it identifies pageviews on the Website. A pageview is defined as a request from a visitor's browser for a displayable web page, generally an HTML file. This data identifies access increasing dramatically during the last semester.

Date	Average daily pageview hits
1 July - 31 December 2008	263
1 January – 30 June 2009	416
1 July – 26 November 2009	4031

The following graph breaks open the previous data and shows the last semester's pageviews. It identifies the range and variances in access.

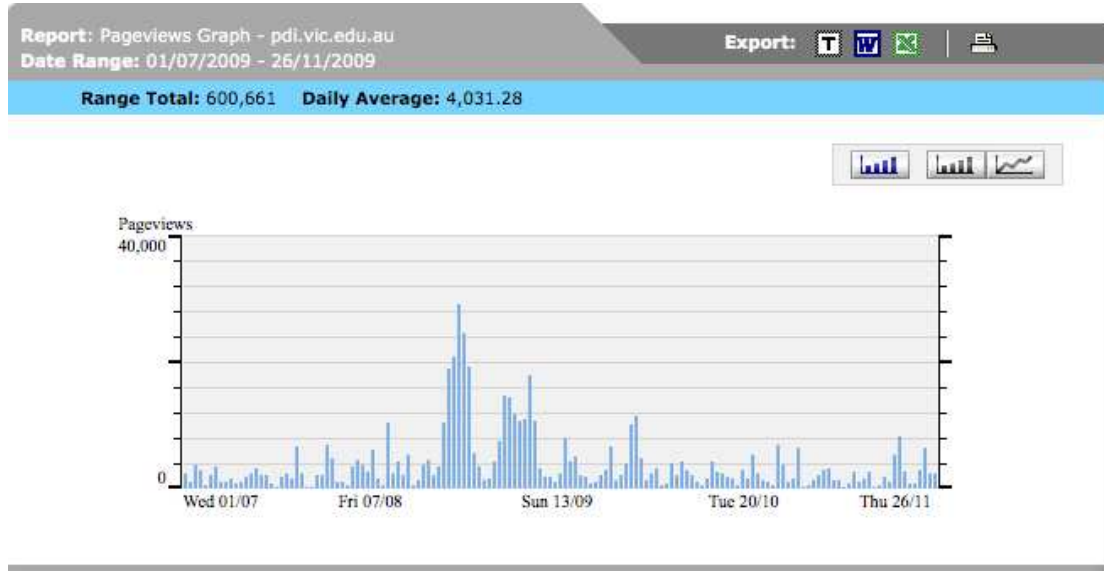


Table 2

The example below is part of the email blast that was released early in August as part of the Pdi marketing strategy. The example also shows how sponsorship can be used.

Jane can read.

Dick is reading too.

They are both reading books.

"Gosh, this a big book" said Dick.

"The author proposes a coherent argument for the liberalisation of the proletariat within an existential framework" said Dick excitedly.

"Hmm....." said Jane, left clicking.

Pdi now has online reading groups, lists and forums to help teachers share and workshop professional reading, helping you and your colleagues keep track of your reading on or offline for collegial discussions.

Go online now www.pdi.vic.edu.au to find out more and enter the Pdi Spot Test for a chance win a Samsung Omnia Mobile Phone.

Pdi
The right PD choice

FIND OUT HOW TO GET OPTUS MOBILE PHONES

yes' OPTUS BUSINESS

FIND OUT MORE

Table 3

The following tables take information from the first two semesters and focuses on the search engine component of the Pdi site.

Total sessions	54,196
Total page views	129,828
Average sessions per day	156.18
Average page views per day	374.14
Average page views per session	2.4
Average hits per session	20.19
Average length of session	3 minutes and 59 seconds

Searches	35187
Search terms used	987
Course views	55166
Courses	1053
Average course views per search	1.6

Table 4

The following list is the ten most commonly used search terms:

- Personalised learning
- Integrated curriculum
- Learning
- Conferences
- E 5
- Language
- Mathematics
- Department
- Testing
- Technology

Table 5

The Quality Assurance Discussions

Three Qads have been undertaken since the inception of Pdi. In this paper comparison is made between the 2008 November and the 2009 November processes. These audits were undertaken by ACER staff and were designed to support providers in gaining a deeper understanding of the VIT Standards for Professional Practice and the Principles of Effective Professional Learning so that they would accurately display their courses on Pdi in relation to the two key documents. They were also used as further quality assurance for each program. A representative sample of 10% of providers was chosen from the database as at the 29th of September in both years. The sample included large, small, regional and metropolitan providers.

Responses

- In 2009 providers reported a better understanding of the Standards and the PEPs.
- In both years providers reported high satisfaction with ACER administration support, which they identified as very important and crucial for the success of the project.
- In both years providers reported satisfaction in being included in the Qads.
- In both years a varied understanding of the standards and the role of the PEPs was identified.
- A high level of accuracy (>80%) in the description of provider courses. (Statistically higher in 2009) In discussion, the inaccuracy in both years was linked to time constraints, a lack of understanding of self-assessment and non-educational personnel being responsible for the input of information.
- In 2009 there was some confusion from providers in relating their courses to the standards. A small, though significant number thought that all standards needed to be referenced.
- In 2008 a small cohort of providers mentioned that a number of teachers did not know about the standards; there was no mention of this in 2009.
- In both years providers identified the need for Pdi to be able to record and calculate professional development hours for teachers.

- In both years promotion and marketing of Pdi was raised as a concern, identifying the need to increase marketing to teachers. Communication between VIT and providers was also identified as needing improvement.
- In both years the need for help screens and pop-up information was identified.
- In 2009 providers asked for a category to be added to the delivery mode section to identify 'in school' delivery.

Analysis

Access to the site, both initially to Pdi and then to the search engine through Pdi has been at an acceptable rate and increasing over the period of time since inception. It is surmised that a component of the 250% rise between the last two semesters is a greater awareness and access by casual relief teachers (CRT) to the reading group area of the site. This can be directly related to the ongoing development of CRT networks.

The pageview table is an improved insight into how the site is accessed, though, the table as it is based on average daily pageviews, can be distorted by 'spike usage'. *Table 2* shows these spike in late August early September (before the school holidays), directly after a marketing campaign and CRT information meetings. This table also shows for the period of time, 118 days, there were more than 600,000 pageviews, which although there is little to compare with in this market, would seem a reasonable result in the third semester of operation.

Table 4, a more in-depth analysis of the professional development search component of the site, shows that on average there has been approximately 155 accesses of pages per day. This has been a statistic used with providers who generally are pleased with this amount of search traffic. This, combined with 35,187 searches, and the use of 987 search terms has demonstrated to providers the need to present their professional development programs in terms used by teachers when searching. *Table 5* has been a supplementary support for providers as they endeavor to tailor courses around teacher needs. The inclusion of such terms as Personalized learning, E5 (A Victorian Education Department Initiative) and learning teams has demonstrated the need for providers to continue to develop an understanding of contemporary education and the terms teachers are using.

Table 4 also provides information on the amount of courses on the database, though this may be a misleading statistic as this number is courses available on the day the data was harvested and not an overall calculation of the courses, which after a manual count total is 1987.

The Quality Assurance Discussions provide significant anecdotal evidence of the success of the initiative, as many responses are positive and provide in-depth recommendations. The information gathered in the majority of interviews complements the statistical data but in other examples a number of issues have been identified. The foremost of these is a need for a better understanding of the Standards and the Principles as a foundation for the development of good professional development. Secondly providers have given many ideas for easy use of the Website and the need for it to reflect a more contemporary Web 2 social networking model. Thirdly, many interviewed identified the need for the institute to provide a facility for teachers to be able to store their professional development records and documentation.

Conclusion

Following the first eighteen months of feedback and data collection, the institute is at present undertaking a review and redevelopment of the Pdi content management system to further improve navigation, to expand help facilities for providers, to make website navigation easier and to develop an online users' guide. The Institute is, concurrently, redeveloping the reading groups and reading list facilities in line with contemporary Web 2 networking concepts and strategies and is going to use this further growth to complement the release of the planned second part of Pdi, MiPdi.

MiPdi will allow for individual, secure logins and will provide a storage area for professional development records, guidance for appropriate reflection on professional development, calculation of professional development hours and a dynamic link between teacher records and the proposed VIT teacher portal.

The institute is continuing to extend its marketing approaches around Pdi and MiPdi as a number of the strategies have proven to be successful.

References

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