Mentors and reflective frameworks: Internationalising the local provision of professional development in e-Learning: A New Zealand case study

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Abstract

The concept of reflection as a tool to improve professional practice has been widely debated in educational circles for a number of decades. Advocates of reflective practice assert deep learning occurs as individuals make meaning from their experiences through the process of reflection. To engage participants in the reflective process, to aid them in making connections between their previous experiences and accepted international standards, self-reflective frameworks have been developed. Reflective frameworks enable professionals to identify both their key strengths and focus areas for improvement. As individuals compare their current performance against accepted best-practice they are able to take ownership of their professional development and generate personal learning plans (PLPs) to meet their identified needs. However, an inherent risk in this self-reflective approach is the existing cognitive ability of the individual to undertake the complex tasks of reflection and the subsequent creation of a PLP. One way to mitigate this inherent risk is through the appointment of a mentor. This case study will explore the design, development and deployment of a self-reflective framework, The Competency Assessment Tool (The CAT), and describe how mentor-learner roles and responsibilities are defined. The study will conclude that through this process of on-going refection, mentoring, feedback and follow-through a local environment, encouraging greater autonomy, personal transformation and deeper self-reflection is created on the foundation blocks of international best-practice.

Key Words: Reflection, Reflective Frameworks, Mentors, Personal Learning Plans

Context

Driven by fiscal restraints and the need to remain globally completive in an increasingly knowledge-based, networked world, successive New Zealand governments have introduced a raft of educational initiatives (Ministry of Education, 2010). In the tertiary education sector these reforms have focused on firstly, improving performance and efficiency ensuring more learners, national and international, from a broader ethnic, cultural and educational background can complete higher qualifications at an affordable or competitive cost (Clayton, 2011) and secondly, increasing the organisational integration of e-learning systems and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) applications for administrative purposes and teaching and learning (Ministry of Education, 2004). As a consequence of these reforms educational institutions have widened entry criteria and aggressively marketed course offerings both internally and externally. This has resulted in greatly increased enrolments from both domestic and international markets. Educators are now engaged with increased numbers of culturally diverse learners in environments that often discourage group and/or individual tuition. Learners and educators need to acquire ICT skills and master software applications they were previously unfamiliar with. In essence, the introduction of these reforms has seen a fundamental shift in conceptions of teaching, the use of e-learning and the provision of professional development in the New Zealand tertiary sector (Clayton, 2011a).

Conceptions of Teaching

Traditionally educators in the New Zealand tertiary sector have been employed for their depth of knowledge in a specific discipline rather than for their expertise in teaching practice. Not surprisingly, many of these educators have a limited repertoire of teaching skills often dominated by transmission modes of delivery such as, demonstrations, tutorials, workshops or lectures (Brockbank & McGill, 2007). In these modes the educator is a 'broadcaster' transferring ideas, facts, processes and concepts wholesale into learners' heads. This concept of the educator broadcaster is illustrated in Figure 1 below (Clayton, 2009, p.10).
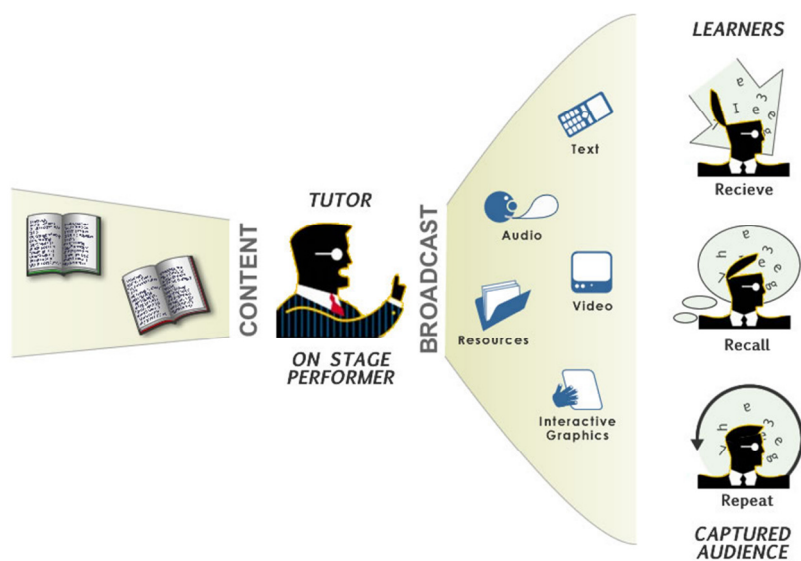

Figure 1 *Educator broadcaster*

The acceptance by tertiary institutions of increased enrolments of learners from broad ethnic, cultural and educational backgrounds creates a culturally diverse learner cohort. This cohort holds multiple-views of phenomena and has multiple-meanings for words that have proved to be useful to them in making sense of the world that surrounds them. In the learning environment created by this cohort it is an expectation educators will adapt instructional strategies and content presented to meet the educational, social and cultural needs of this diverse audience (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2001). This approach aligns with constructivist theories of teaching. Constructivists acknowledge learners hold views of the world and meanings for words that are intelligible, (coherent and internally consistent) plausible, (reconciled with the views currently held) and fruitful, (useful to the learner in making sense) (Osborne & Freyberg, 1985: Posner, Strike, Hewson, & Gertzog, 1982). To constructivists knowledge is constructed as participants reflect upon their experiences and make connections between the new conceptions offered and their current knowledge and previous experiences. It is in this recognition of patterns and the creation of connections that is the key to learning (Gunstone, 1994: Sugerman, Doherty, & Garvey, 2000). To constructivists understanding is dependent on an individual making meaning from their learning experiences. In this mode the educator actively encourages learner engagement with materials, they facilitate learning. This concept of the educator facilitator is illustrated in Figure 2 below (Clayton, 2009, p11).
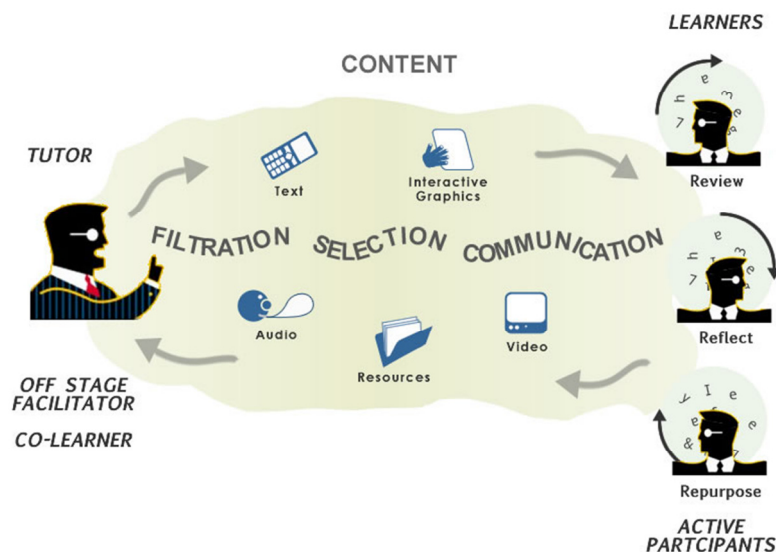
Figure 2 *Educator facilitator*

Use of e-Learning

In a recent review of the range e-learning courses and activities developed and delivered by training organisations and educational institutions, it was clear developers, providers and users appear to have different concepts of what is meant by e-learning (Clayton, Elliott, Saravani, Greene, and Huntington, 2008). Individual learning events, courses and programmes differed in the degree of interactivity occurring between learners and tutors, the multi-media richness of content developed and the delivery mechanisms used to manage the learning experience. Each educational institution appeared to develop and deliver e-Learning based upon the current experiences of its tutors, the financial and physical resources available and the perceived learning needs of students (Clayton, 2007).

In practise e-Learning typically involves interactivity, such as student engagement with digital content, online interaction between learners and their instructors and online interaction between learners and their peers. It is facilitated by the use of computers (stand-alone and networked), digital communication tools (such as chat, e-mail, forums, messenger, VoIP) digital content creation tools (such as Wikis, Blogs and Web-folios) and digital content (such as web- pages, CD-Roms and DVDs) (Clayton & Elliott, 2007). In some cases, such as in an instructor facilitated video-conference, e-learning activities are carried out in 'real-time' and the activity undertaken is time constrained and dependant on attendance of all participants. This is known as synchronous e-learning. In other instances, such as student engagement with a CD-ROM simulation activity, the learning will occur in 'nominal-time' and the activity undertaken is not time constrained and is independent of other participants. This is referred to as asynchronous learning, or self-paced learning (Clayton & Elliott, 2007). In essence e-Learning can be usefully described as learning that is enabled or supported by the smart use of information and communications technology (ICT).

Provision of Professional Development

In the provision of professional development (PD) in e-learning there appears to be a natural association between staff acquiring skills (are competent), deploying these skills in their professional practice (are confident) and believing the use of Information and Communication Technologies are beneficial to themselves as professionals and to their

students as learners (are capable) (Clayton, et al, 2009). This suggests that, in structuring a balanced PD programme, three key elements should be logically addressed:

- *Competencies (How):* Practical sessions should be offered on 'how' to competently operate various ICTs both for administrative and academic purposes and for learners to utilise them in their learning activities.

- *Confidence (When):* Sessions, enhanced by authentic examples, should be designed to show 'when' ICTs can be successfully integrated into learning activities and administrative tasks.

- *Capability (Why):* Sessions, supported by applied research, should be structured to illustrate 'why' using ICT in learning environments and for administrative purposes is beneficial to tutors, learners and organisations.

Reflection

Traditional professional development activities focused on information delivery (for example classroom instruction or lecture), and conducted at venues outside the workplace, often fail to influence professional practice (Yukawa, & Harada, 2011). Research has demonstrated that changes in professional practice are most effective when they are situated within a community that encourages reflection on genuine problems (Webster-Wright, 2009). The concept of reflection (the conscious act of purposefully thinking about activities undertaken) has been widely debated in educational circles for a number of decades (Kreber, 2004: Korthagen, & Vasalos 2005). To advocates of reflective practice, deep learning is dependent on individuals making meaning from their professional experiences through the process of reflection (Brockbank & McGill, 2007). The outcomes of the reflective process help individuals firstly, highlight the strengths of their current professional practice and, secondly, identify areas where undertaking professional development will facilitate increased professional capability. It is argued this on-going reflection helps individuals iteratively build their professional capability and capacity (Clayton et al, 2009; Sugerman et al, 2000). In essence, reflection encourages a professional development environment that is on-going (sustained), connected to practice (situated) and focused on professional tasks (authentic).

Self-Reflective Frameworks

A fundamental criterion for the success of reflective practice is the underlying ability of the individual to make the appropriate connections between their existing professional experiences and acceptable professional behaviours. If a practitioner has limited professional experience, or limited exposure to other professionals, his/her capacity to make informed judgements, to make the required connections, will be limited (Clayton, 2011). To address this barrier, to engage participants in the self-reflective process and to aid them in making connections between their previous experiences and professional practices, self-reflective frameworks, based on acceptable professional standards have been developed (Clayton, 2011a).

Fundamentally, these self-reflective frameworks are designed to help individuals, with limited experience, or limited exposure to, or engagement with, other professionals, to make connections and comparisons between their existing professional actions and international best-practice. This comparative process, using globally accepted standards, enables the individual, no matter their location, culture or language, to identify which competencies they are considered to be proficient in and those skills they need to develop. The result of this reflective process is the generation of internationally-grounded personal learning plans

(PLPs) (Ward and Richardson, 2007) enabling them to become self-regulated learners (Zimmerman, 1990).

Mentors

It could be argued the focus on standards-based criteria as the foundation of reflective frameworks act as a constraint in the reflective process; it will restrict academic freedom and prescribe rigid learning events (Strudler & Wetzel, 2009). These valid concerns can be addressed by the appointment of an experienced mentor. The term mentor originates from Greek mythology when the well-travelled, and absent parent, Odysseus entrusted the care and education of his child to his friend called Mentor (Penner, 2001). Traditionally, in business and industry, mentoring strategies are used to attract, retain, and promote employees, ultimately improving individual and corporate performance and effectiveness (Luna and Cullen, 1995). In the compulsory education sector (pre-tertiary) mentoring has long been acknowledged an integral part of professional learning and development. For example, in initial teacher education practicums student teachers learn skills and techniques from experienced classroom teachers. In the first years of their profession newly-qualified teachers learn professional skills and strategies from experienced colleagues (Scottish Government, 2011). In higher education, while it is not always been easy for staff themselves to access, mentoring has long been regarded as an important adjunct to teaching and learning, (Darwin & Palmer, 2009). Through sustained feedback and follow-up mentors create environments that encourage greater autonomy, personal transformation and deeper self-reflection (Galbraith, M. 2003: Basile, Olson, & Nathenson-Mejia, 2003). As such they should be regarded as a critical aspect of the self-reflective process.

Portfolios

Historically speaking, in artistic circles, portfolios not only summarised an artist's creative achievements but they also illustrated those achievements in a physical form. As portfolios encourage the accumulation of physical evidence to illustrate achievement they are seen to be a valuable tool for the formal assessment of competencies and are used in many professions such as nursing, medicine, and teaching (McColgan, & Blackwood, 2009). Similarly, in formal accreditation environments, systematically compiled digital portfolios provide a protected shared space where learner evidence of competencies can be rigorously controlled and systematically evaluated (Fiedler, Mullen, & Finnegan, 2009). But portfolios go beyond assessment. For example, in initial teacher education portfolios provided a number of benefits including, on-going opportunities for participants to reflect on their teaching experiences, improved understanding of required teaching standards and enhanced on-going communication between staff and learners (Strudler & Wetzel, 2009). In today's educational world a portfolio can be regarded as the purposeful collection of a learner's work structured to exhibit and illustrate the learners' efforts and achievements over time (Kim, Ng, & Lim, 2010). Portfolios should be viewed as a personal learning management tool encouraging individual improvement, personal growth and development, and a commitment to life-long learning by encouraging on-going reflection (Abrami & Barrett 2005).

Internationalising the Curriculum: A New Zealand Case Study

The Certificate in Open, Flexible and Networked Learning (COFNL)

In 2010 the Waikato Institute of Technology recognised the need to provide professional development (PD) in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for staff to meet the needs of its increasingly culturally diverse and technologically experienced student population. *The Certificate in Open, Flexible and Networked Learning* (COFNL) consists of

5 modules based on identifiable Unit Standards registered with the New Zealand Qualification Authority (NZQA, 2011). Basing the modules on these registered standards ensured the institute was following best national practice and it aligned institutional PD delivery with national goals.

The CAT: A Reflective Framework

To engage participants in reflective practice and to aid them in making connections between identified pedagogical standards in ICT and their previous experiences a self-reflective competency assessment tool (The CAT) was created for COFNL learners. The CAT was designed to enable learners to assess their current competencies against nationally defined standards. The CAT interface (see figure 3 below) provides the learner with a series of statements relating to each of the five modules within the COFNL. The statements within each module are classified within three categories, understanding, evidence and moderation.

Examine the relationships between participants in OFNL.	
Understanding	
I have a good understanding of the relationships (such as direct, indirect, active, passive, interactive, independent, and interdependent) that exist in open, flexible and networked learning environments.	Partially agree ▾
I have evaluated the impact different relationships between participants in OFNL (such as direct, indirect, active, passive, interactive, independent, and interdependent) have on student learning in different contexts.	Strongly agree ▾
Evidence	
I can provide digital evidence of my understanding of the relationships (such as direct, indirect, active, passive, interactive, independent, and interdependent) in open, flexible and networked learning environments.	Partially agree ▾
I can provide digital evidence of how my understanding of the relationships between participants in OFNL (such as direct, indirect, active, passive, interactive, independent, and interdependent) has been used in my practice in different contexts.	Agree ▾
Moderation	
My understanding of the relationships (such as direct, indirect, active, passive, interactive, independent, and interdependent) in open, flexible and networked learning environments has been peer reviewed.	Select ▾
Practical application of my understanding of the relationships between participants in OFNL (such as direct, indirect, active, passive, interactive, independent, and interdependent) has been peer reviewed and assessed.	Select ▾

Figure 3: Categories, statements and responses

Participants are asked to reflect upon and then respond to individual statements. As participants progress through the CAT their answers affect the indicator colour on the index page. The indicator colours are based on the familiar "traffic light" theme (green, go: Yellow, caution: Red, Stop) and this is illustrated in figure 4 below;
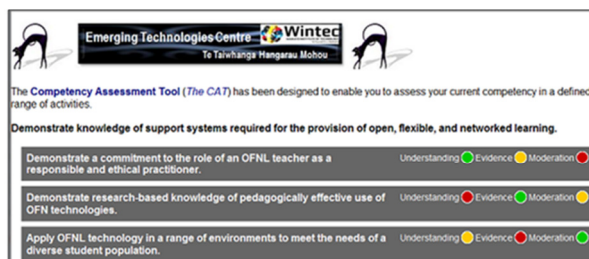
🟢 Competent, confident and capable in this aspect

🟡 Has a degree of competence and confidence in this aspect

🔴 Needs to acquire competence and confidence in this aspect

Figure 4: The traffic-lights

As the participant progress through the modules, categories and statements, their responses provide a pictorial reflective framework carpet. This reflective framework and visual carpet is illustrated in figure 5 below.
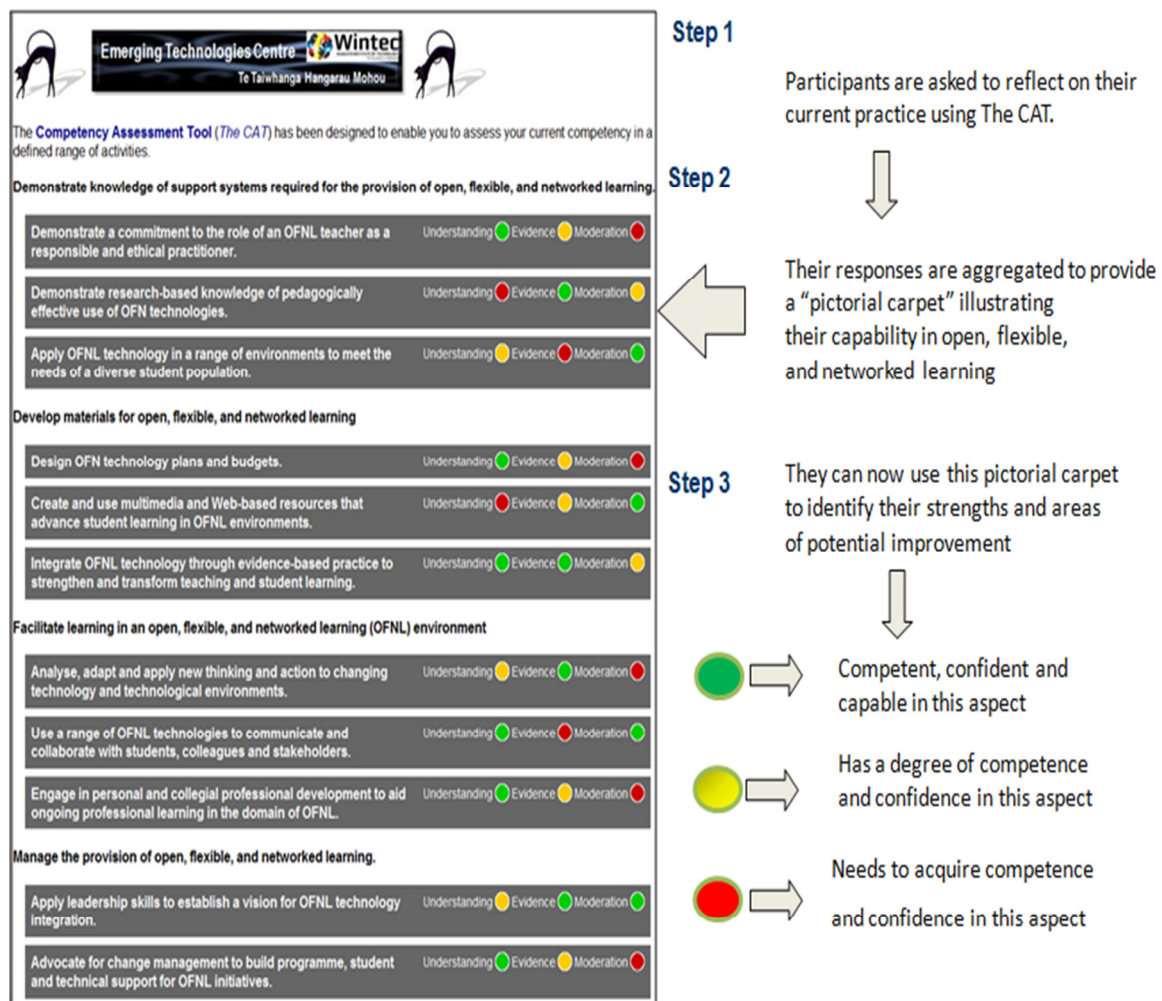

Figure 5: The visual carpet

The visual carpet produced from learner engagement provides the learner with;

- An initial assessment of their current knowledge, experience and understanding of individual aspects of this domain.

- An indication of potential starting points to begin a learning journey, and

- Navigational tips to map a learning route from starting points to intended achievements.

In essence engaging with The CAT assists the learner in the creation of a personalised learning plan empowering them to become self-regulated learners.

The Supervised Mode

Whilst designing individualised personal learning plans are focused on the individual taking ownership of the learning process, the regulations of COFNL recognise individuals cannot achieve their intended professional goals in isolation. When the participant enrols in the certificate they are allocated a mentor. The mentor will use the results of the CAT and

learners personalised learning plan to guide learners by providing appropriate links to educational theory and practical demonstrations. However, mentorship is not a one-way process. COFNL identifies both the responsibilities of the mentor and learner. The responsibilities of the mentor include:

- Being available at predetermined times throughout the duration of the learners' enrolment in the course.
- Providing ongoing guidance, encouragement and support, and assist students to achieve their identified learning outcomes.
- Ensuring learners' receive timely and appropriate feedback on course progress and on outcomes of specific requests.
- Monitoring the individual learner to ensure completion of a comprehensive record of achievement in a personal online e-portfolio

The responsibilities of the learner include

- Acting in an ethical and responsible way in all communications associated with the course.
- Submitting evidence of achievement of individual outcomes on a regular basis.
- Submitting evidence of achievement of learning outcomes in the format outlined by their mentor.
- Abiding by any response timeframe set by mentors to ensure appropriate and timely feedback is received.

Digital Portfolios

In accreditation environments like COFNL, digital portfolios can provide a protected space where learner evidence of competencies can be rigorously controlled and systematically evaluated. In COFNL learners are shown how to structure their portfolio around the assessment rubric created for each of the five modules. The assessment rubric provides a measure of quality of performance based on established practice in open, flexible and networked learning environments as identified by the New Zealand National Qualifications Authority (NZQA, 2011). In essence the rubric is based upon what the participant can demonstrate they have learnt, rather than what has been taught. As such it should be regarded as an authentic competency assessment tool. Crucially the evidence provided will be the learners own creation showing how their experiences have met the identified standard. An example of this structure is illustrated in Table 1below.

Main Category	Sub-category
Demonstrate knowledge of theoretical models of adult learning	Apply sound knowledge and understanding of adult learning theories and epistemological principles to the effective design of learning objectives, curriculum and application of OFNL technologies in learning and teaching.
	Contribute to the development of the knowledge base of the OFNL community.

Table 1: Portfolio Structure

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has argued recent educational reforms, the need to remain global competitive and internationally relevant has seen higher educational institutions in New Zealand aggressively market their course offerings. The result of this marketing strategy is the creation of diverse cultural learning cohorts and the increased integration of e-learning applications in course delivery. As a consequence, educators are now engaging with increased numbers of distributed learners in ICT rich environments they are often unfamiliar with. This requires a fundamental shift in their perceptions of teaching, e-learning technologies and how subsequent individual professional development needs are identified. To empower individuals, to ensure professional development is sustained, situated and authentic a reflective practice model has been advocated. The reflective process enables individuals to create personal learning plans (PLPs) allowing them to take ownership of the professional development process.

However, an identified risk inherent a shift to a reflective model is the existing abilities of educators to effectively reflect upon their current practice. In short do they have the depth of knowledge, or relevant experience, to identify the professional development required? To mitigate this risk it is argued firstly, a self-reflective framework approach, where educators are able to make meaningful connections between their current practice and recognised international standards, is appropriate. Secondly, to overcome perceived potential constraints generated by the reliance on international-based standards as the criteria for reflective frameworks, mentorship strategies should be used. This self-reflective framework and mentorship approach enables educators to work independently, manage time effectively, and think self-critically. The active engagement of individuals in the design of their own professional development encourages them to become self-regulated practitioners'. This means individuals are able to ensure professional development activities undertaken will be firstly, effective: do what they say they will do, secondly, efficient: use the resources allocated in the most appropriate ways and finally, relevant: ensure development undertaken is professionally recognised.

The effect of a model of professional development driven by an internationally focused reflective-framework approach and mentorship will be positive. Through the process of sustained refection, mentoring, feedback and follow-through a local environment, encouraging greater autonomy, personal transformation and deeper self-reflection, can be created on the foundation blocks of international best-practice.

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