Teacher Professional Learning Environment Preferences

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In 2015 over 100,000 NSW teachers were surveyed about their professional development experiences, preferences and needs. Almost 12,000 teachers responded to the survey. Among other things, teachers were asked to nominate their preferred learning environment (mode); online, face-to-face or blended (a combination of online and face-to face). There were 8899 responses to the questions about learning environments.

Preferred learning environment

Over 50% of teachers' preferred face-to-face learning, while 38% preferred blended learning and 11% preferred online learning (Figure 1).

Figure 1 is a bar graph showing the preference for face-to-face learning over blended learning and online learning
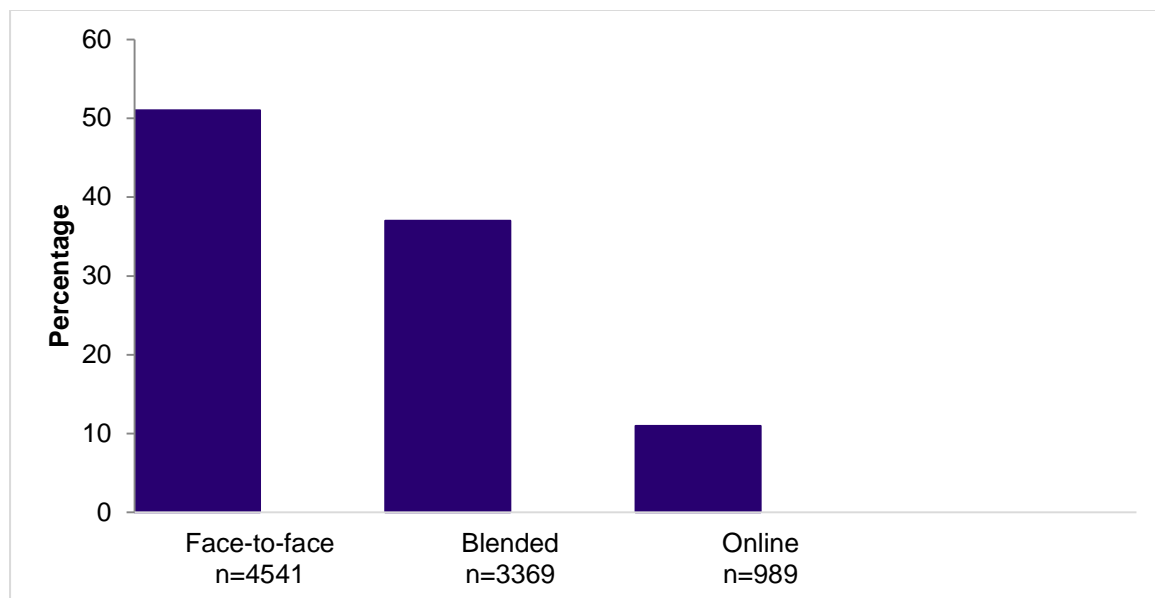

Geographic Location

Respondents nominated their geographic location as being metropolitan, regional, rural or remote.

The preference for face-to face learning was common to metropolitan (52%), regional (50%) and rural teachers (52%) but there was a trend towards blended learning, among the small number of teachers from remote locations (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Preferred learning environment by geographic location
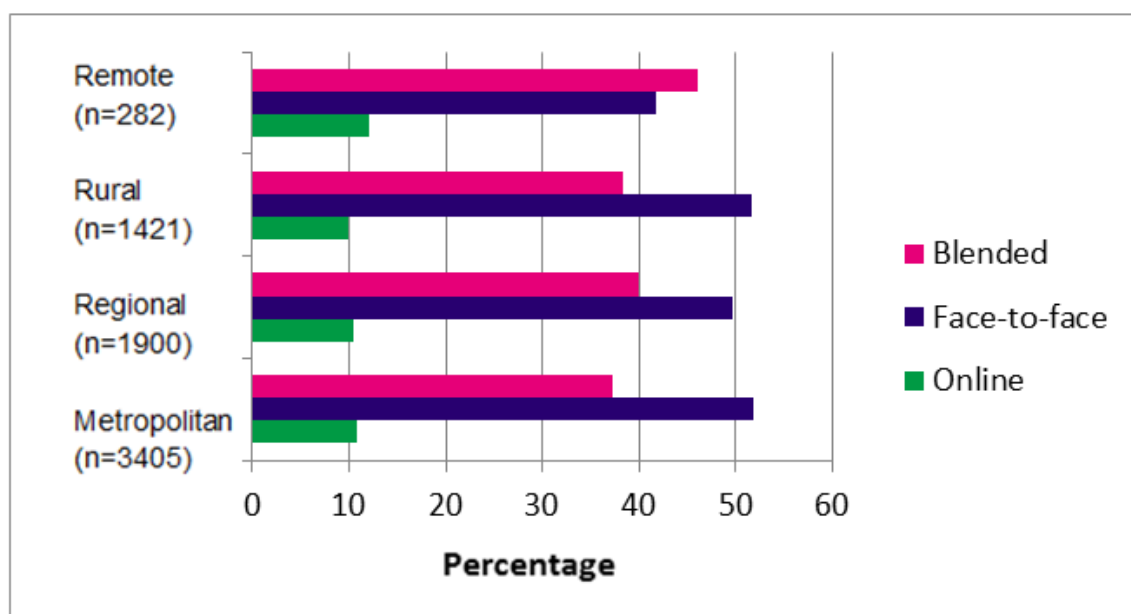
Teaching Experience

> Teachers at all levels of experience preferred face-to-face learning. The least experienced teachers were the most positive about online learning.

The preference for face-to face learning over blended or online learning was evident at all career stages (between 49% and 53% for all groups). The preference for online learning was highest among the least experienced teachers (14%) and decreased with experience to around 6% for teachers with more than 30 years of experience. Teachers with 6 to 10 years of experience preferred blended learning less often than more experienced teachers.

Table 1 presents learning environment preferences by teaching experience

|	Years of teaching experience						
	1-5 (n=2406)	6-10 (n=2309)	11-15 (n=1080)	16-20 (n=730)	21-25 (n=745)	26-30 (n=597)	30+ (n=1032
Face-to-face	49.5	53.1	48.7	49.6	51.7	52.4	52.3
Blended	36.9	33.8	39.8	42.1	39.3	40.5	41.4
Online	13.6	13.1	11.5	8.4	9.0	7.0	6.3

Sector

> Teachers from all sectors preferred face-to-face learning, with teachers from the independent sector being the most in favour.

When responses were analysed by sector (i.e. government, systemic, independent and other), there was a clear preference for face-to face learning in each group. However, teachers from the independent sector had the greatest preference for face-to face learning (58%), followed

by government teachers and systemic teachers (both 50%), while 46% of the group categorised as 'other' preferred face-to-face learning. Blended learning was the second preference for each sector (government 39%, systemic 40%, other 40% and independent teachers 31%). More independent teachers preferred face-to-face over blended learning than their counterparts in other sectors. Teachers who identified as being in the 'other' category (for example, many early childhood, casual, unemployed and university teachers) more often nominated online learning as their preferred mode (14%) compared to teachers from the other sectors (10% to 11% Figure 3).

Figure 3 Learning environment preferences by sector
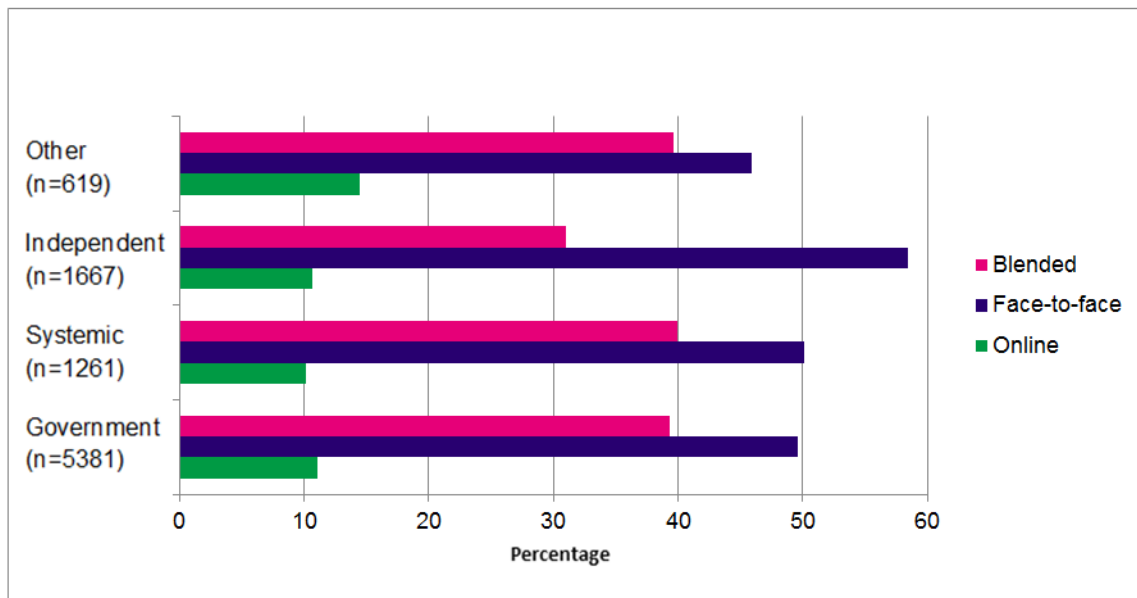

Employment status

> Permanent full-time, temporary full-time, and permanent part-time teachers preferred face-to-face learning, but casual teachers preferred blended learning.

While permanent full-time teachers (57%), temporary full-time teachers (51%), and permanent part-time teachers (52%) preferred face-to-face learning, casual teachers expressed a preference for blended learning (43%) over face-to-face learning (38%). The preference for online learning increased with the 'temporariness' of the position (permanent full-time 8%, permanent part-time 9%, temporary full-time 12% and temporary part-time/casual 19% Figure 4).

Figure 4 Learning environment preferences by teachers' employment status
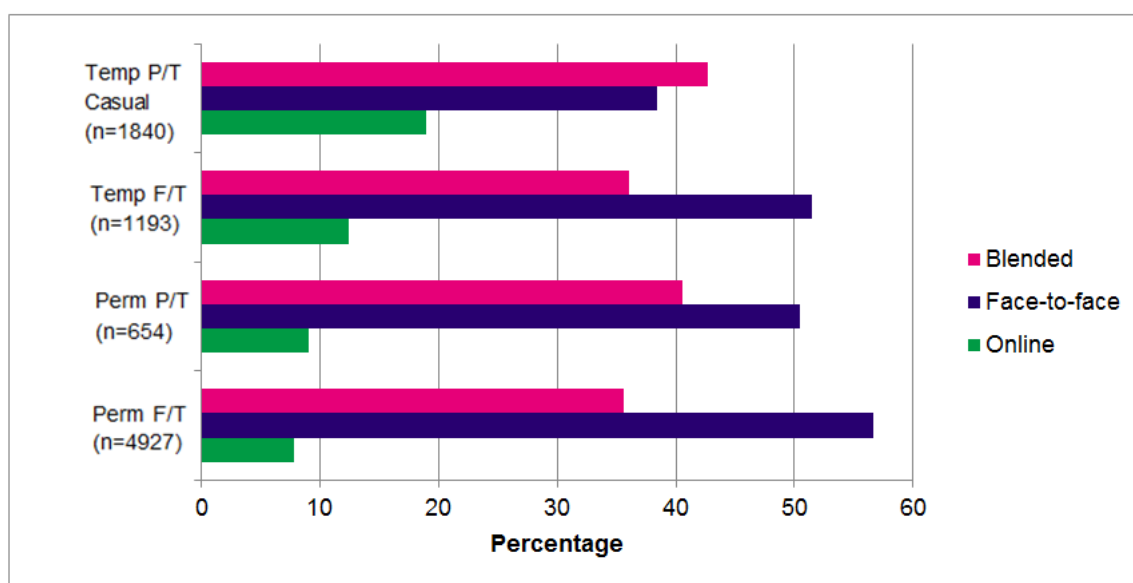
Accreditation status

Teachers from all accreditation groups expressed a preference for face-to face learning.

Teachers were grouped by accreditation status (pre-2004, conditional, provisional, proficient, highly accomplished and lead teachers). Due to small numbers, the categories of highly accomplished and lead teachers were combined for this report. Teachers from all accreditation categories expressed the preference for face-to-face over blended and online learning, although the finding was less evident among provisionally accredited teachers who expressed the greatest preference for online learning. Teachers trained prior to 2004 and highly accomplished and lead teacher's least favoured online learning (Table 2).

Table 2 Preferred PD learning environment by accreditation status

	Pre-2004 (n=2826)	Conditional (n=343)	Provisional (n=1714)	Proficient (n=2657)	Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers (n=159)
Face-to-face	52.2	49.3	44.5	53.1	54.1
Blended	40.2	38.2	40.1	35.1	38.4
Online	7.6	12.5	15.4	11.8	7.5

Setting

Teachers from early childhood, primary and secondary settings preferred face-to-face learning. Compared to primary or secondary teachers, fewer early childhood teachers preferred blended learning.

When teachers were grouped by teaching setting (early childhood, primary and secondary), again there was a clear preference for face-to-face learning for all groups (early childhood 56%, primary 48% and secondary 53%).Fewer early childhood teachers then their primary and secondary counterparts favoured blended learning (32% compared to primary 39% and secondary 37%). Online learning was the least preferred mode for all groups (early childhood 12%, primary 13% and secondary 10%) (Table 3).

Table 3 Preferred learning environment by setting

	Early Childhood	**Primary**	**Secondary**
Face-to-face	56.0	48.4	52.6
Blended	32.0	38.9	37.1
Online	12.0	12.7	10.3

Features of Professional Learning Environments

After nominating their preferred learning environment (face-to-face, blended or online) respondents indicated the relative importance of a range of learning features within those environments (eg, 'quality of content', 'professional presenters'). Respondents indicated the level of importance of each feature on a four-point scale where in order of increasing importance the points were labelled 'not important', 'less important', 'important' and 'most important'. For the purposes of this report the responses for 'important' and 'most important' were combined and have been expressed as a percentage of the total number of responses for each feature.

> Quality of content was ranked first across all learning environments. Teachers also valued a strong basis of research or educational expertise, excellent presentation and take home resources and strategies. Teachers who preferred online learning less often valued human interaction features.

Quality of content was ranked as the most important feature in all learning environments (face-to-face 93%, blended 99% and online 97%) and teachers also prioritised a strong basis of research or educational expertise (face-to face 93%, blended 94% and online 91%), excellent presentation (face-to-face 93%, blended 88% and online 85%), and take home resources and strategies (face-to-face 88%, blended 88% and online 85%).

However, the profile of the responses for online learning differed from that of the other groups regarding almost all other features. The respondents who preferred online learning rated the features that could be categorised as human interaction features as less important than the other groups. For example, the online learner group rated a professional presenter as important or very important (53%) less often than the face-to-face (95%) and blended learning (87%) groups. The online group also rated the chance to network and build relationships, the chance to discuss new materials and insights, interaction with experts, opportunity to engage professionally, time to critically reflect on practice and structured opportunities to prepare for practice as less important than the face-to face or blended learning groups. The online group

clearly valued the quality of content and a strong basis of research or educational expertise above most other features.

On the other hand, the face-to-face group highly valued a professional presenter, a chance to discuss new materials and insights, excellent presentation skills, interaction with experienced or expert people in the field, and opportunities to engage professionally, along with their preference for quality of content and a strong basis of research or educational expertise. The teachers who favoured blended learning responded in similar manner to the face-to-face group however they placed much greater importance on time to critically reflect on practice than the other groups (83% compared to face-to-face 80% and online 77%) and greater importance on quality of content (99%) than the face-to-face group (93%). (Table 4)

When teachers in the face-to-face group were asked about their interaction with technology, 74.9% rated interpersonal learning not driven by technology as most important or important.

When teachers in the blended and online groups were asked about their interaction with technology 75.3% of the blended group and 74.5% of the online group responded that it was important or very important.

Table 4 Most important/important features of preferred PD learning environments

Feature	Face-to-face n=4541	Blended n=3369	Online n=989
Quality of content	93.0	99.3	96.9
A professional presenter	94.9	87.5	53.2
Strong basis of research or expertise	92.7	94.2	90.7
Excellent presentation	92.7	89.6	85.1
Interaction with expert or experiences people in field	93.3	94.1	74.6
A chance to discuss material and new insights	94.9	93.7	60.3
Opportunity to engage professionally	92.3	93.6	75.1
Take home resources and strategies	88.2	87.9	84.5
Time to critically reflect on practice	80.0	93.0	76.7
Structured opportunities to prepare for practice	87.2	89.9	75.3
A chance to network and build relationships	77.9	80.7	53.5

Summary

- Just over half the respondents expressed their preference for face-to-face learning over blended learning (37%) and online learning (11%).
- Respondents from remote locations showed a slight preference for blended learning over face-to-face learning, while respondents in metropolitan, regional and rural areas preferred face-to-face learning.
- Teachers at all stages of their career preferred face-to-face learning. The least experienced teachers more often preferred online learning than their more experienced colleagues, while blended learning was least preferred by teachers with 6 to 10 years of experience.
- Teachers from all sectors (government, systemic, independent and other) preferred face-to-face learning, however teachers from the independent sector had a stronger preference than the other groups.
- Temporary part-time (i.e. casual/relief) teachers expressed a slight preference for blended learning over face-to-face learning, while permanent, permanent part-time, and temporary full-time teachers preferred face-to-face learning. The preferences for online learning increased with the temporariness of the teaching position (from 8% for permanent full time teachers to 18% for casual teachers).
- Teachers across all stages (early childhood, primary and secondary) preferred face-to-face learning with early childhood teachers expressing a stronger preference for online learning and less of a preference for blended learning than the other groups.
- Irrespective of the learning environment, teachers indicated that quality of content, a strong basis of research or educational expertise, excellent presentation, and take home resources and strategies were of high importance. However, teachers who preferred online learning differed from the face-to-face and blended learning groups regarding most other features. In general, the online group regarded the human interaction features as much less important as the other two groups.