

Learning in place-based work: principles and enablers

Learning is the driver of place-based change. It builds skill and shared understanding and deepens trust, so that communities, government, industry and education providers can act together to create lasting change.

PLACE has reviewed over 40 initiatives across Australia and internationally to identify best-practice learning approaches for place-based work. We identified **6 learning principles** and **6 learning enablers** common to cultivating learning environments in place-based work. Together, they show that strong learning is reflective, relational, and grounded in context, and that individual growth and collective outcomes are closely connected.

Why this matters

Place-based work is complex and adaptive. It relies on the wisdom that lives in communities, and the understanding that comes from being close to both the challenges and the opportunities. It depends on relationships, trust and shared accountability across communities, governments and sectors.

Conventional systems often prioritise compliance, efficiency and outcomes over relationships, lived experience and real-world learning. Funding cycles and reporting processes can often fragment learning opportunities rather than connect them. As a result, valuable local knowledge remains siloed and practice wisdom is isolated, limiting our ability to act together on what we already know.

Various learning and training options are available to support place-based work, but they often operate in isolation and are not consistently connected to practice. The challenge is not a lack of content, but coherence. This review shows that meaningful change occurs when learning is integrated, grounded in local context and applied in everyday practice.

Investing in how we learn creates the capability and coherence required for systems change. When learning is intentional, inclusive and connected to lived experience, it strengthens the social infrastructure that enables communities to lead and sustain change.

For individuals, this looks like learning that is relevant and empowering. It builds confidence, belonging and the practical tools to navigate complexity, helping people grow their capability while contributing to collective outcomes. When learning is a part of everyday work, both people and systems can evolve together.

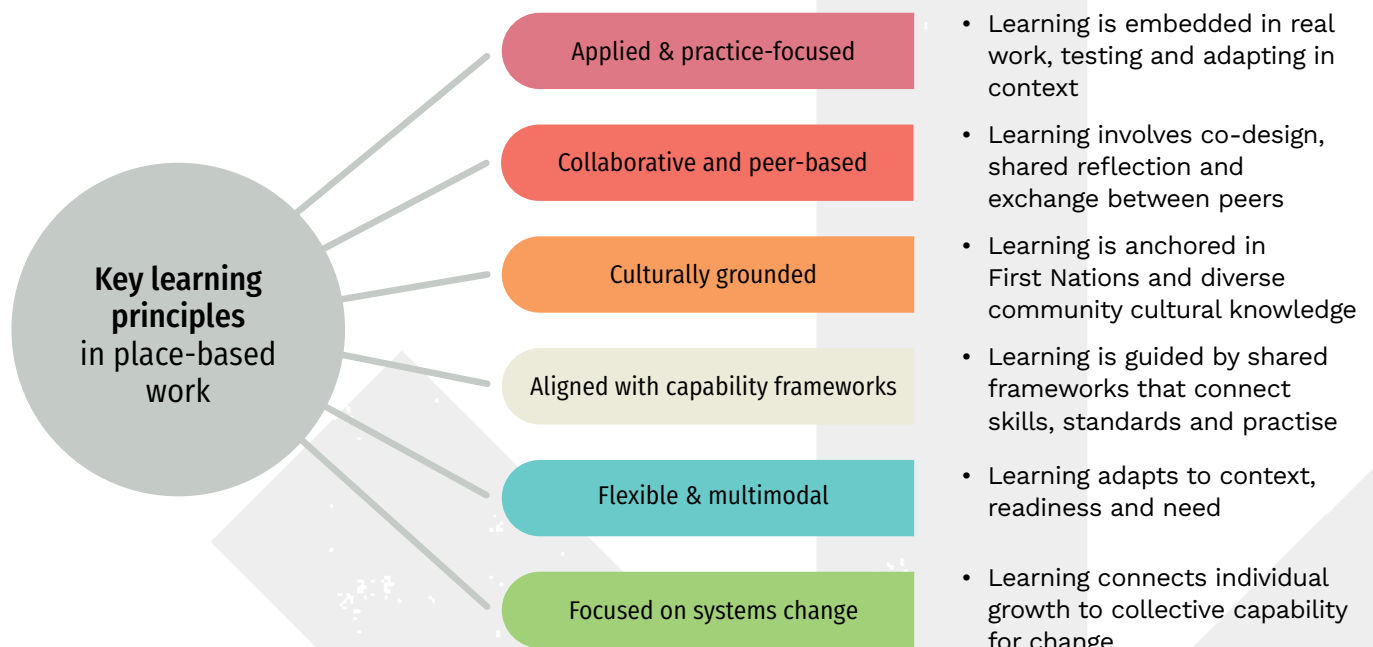
What the research tells us

People learn best when they learn in place: doing the work, sharing what works and drawing on local wisdom. These approaches are applied, peer-led and grounded in lived experience. They value experimentation, dialogue and adaptation.

Across the research, **6 learning principles** consistently appear in place-based contexts (Figure 1). They can be defined as learning that is:

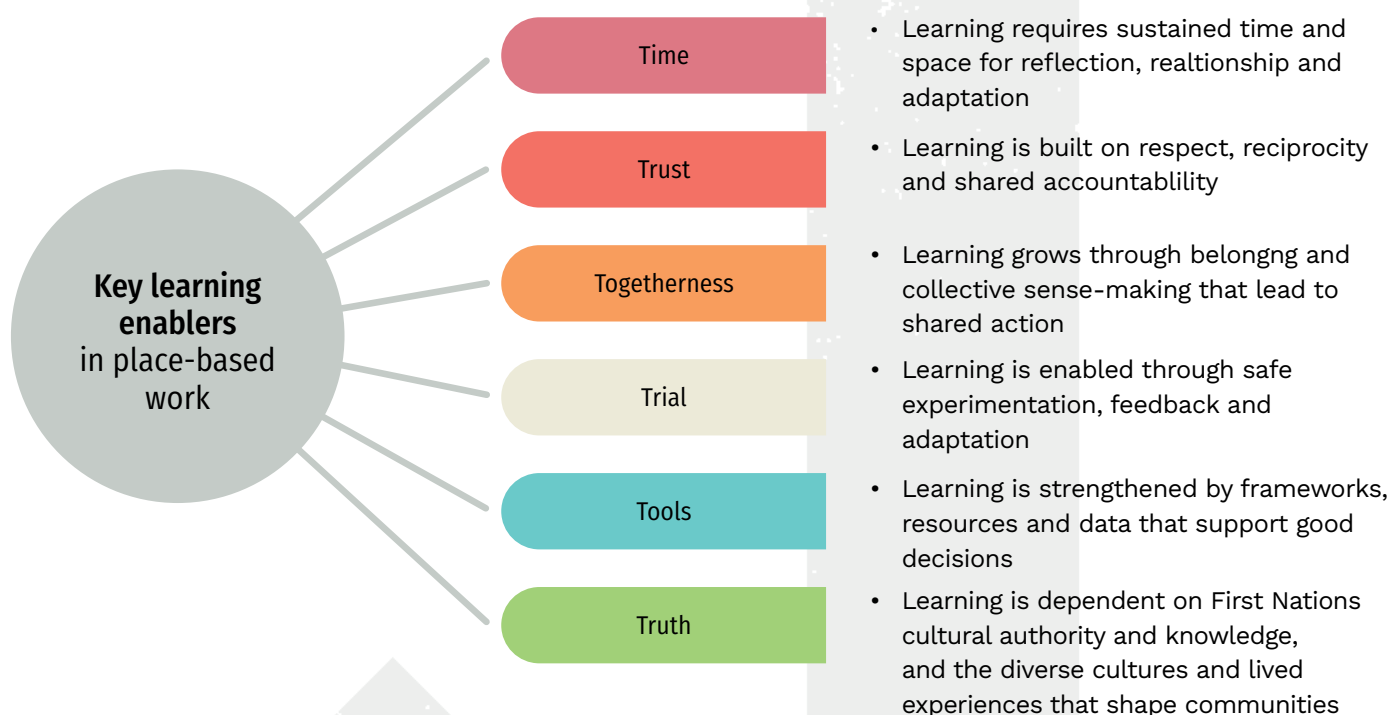
- applied and practice-focused
- collaborative and peer-based
- culturally grounded
- aligned with capability frameworks
- flexible and multimodal
- focused on systems change.

Figure 1: The 6 key learning principles in place-based work



When these principles are supported by the right enabling conditions – **time, trust, togetherness, trial, tools and truth** – learning becomes a driver of reform (Figure 2). It builds confidence, improves practice, and turns shared insight into collective action.

Figure 2: The 6 key learning enablers in place-based work



From principles to action

The challenge is not only knowing what works but creating the conditions for good learning practice to spread, adapt and endure. This means focusing on how to support and strengthen the people who make this work possible, from local practitioners to funders, policy officers and backbone organisations.

In place-based work, 3 elements anchor success: **subsidiarity, accountability and partnership**. The learning principles and enablers in this report show us how we can operationalise those 3 elements day to day.

Subsidiarity: Decisions made close to community

When learning is grounded in community voice, local wisdom shapes what matters and how change happens. For the workforce, this means tools and approaches that respect local leadership, enable adaptation, and commit time to reflective practice.

Subsidiarity is most supported when learning is **culturally grounded** and **applied and practice-focused** – enabled by **time** and **truth**. We can use peer exchange and co-design; centre First Nations leadership and knowledge systems; ground evidence locally; and create safe, co-governed spaces.

What success looks like

- Local leadership – inclusive of First Nations and other community voices – shapes learning, priorities, evidence and decisions.
- People feel safe and confident to test ideas, adapt quickly and share what changes.
- Development of the workforce is embedded in everyday practice – supported by time, tools and rhythms that help people try, learn and adapt.

Partnership: learning done together

Learning thrives in relationship. For the workforce, this means cross-sector partnerships that make learning collective rather than only individual, strengthening the connections across community, government and service systems.

Partnership is strongest where **collaborative and peer-based learning** and **flexible and multimodal** approaches are enabled by **togetherness** and **tools**. We can support this by creating networks and communities of practice, using flexible formats that meet people where they are at, and maintaining transparent governance.

What success looks like

- Peer cohorts and networks translate insight into collective action.
- Transparent governance and collaboration strengthen trust and belonging.
- PLACE acts as a connector, creator and catalyst across the learning ecosystem.

Accountability: learning that leads to action

Learning has impact when it drives improvement, not just understanding. Accountability is supported when **capability frameworks** and a **systems change** focus are paired with conditions that enable **trial** and **trust**. We can do this by building simple feedback loops and shared approaches for measuring impact, and by aligning work to relevant capability standards so improvement is visible and shareable.

What success looks like

- Using shared capability standards makes skills visible and pathways clear.
- Feedback from trials informs continuous improvement and shared accountability.
- Learning and skills development outcomes are shared with communities in accessible and transparent ways.
- A national workforce strategy for place-based change keeps learning connected, coherent and community-led.

Where to next

If we want lasting, community-led change across Australia, we need to treat learning as the foundation for transformation. Learning helps us make sense of complexity and connects practice with policy. Building the place-based workforce using these learning principles and enablers strengthens the skills, capability, consistency and confidence needed for long-term change.

At PLACE, we're putting this vision into action through initiatives such as:

- developing a **national workforce strategy**
- establishing **impact networks** to support peer learning and action
- releasing a **knowledge hub** where stories, tools and resources support anyone working in place-based contexts.

Together, these initiatives aim to make learning visible, valued, impactful and shared – supporting the capability and coherence needed for lasting, community-led change.

We invite you to join us on this journey. You can use the 6 key learning principles and 6 key learning enablers as a short Learning in Practice reflection tool to see where learning is strongest in your work, and identify opportunities for growth. Share your reflections with PLACE via the QR code to co-create the next round of learning offers.

Learning strengths framework

PLACE welcome you to use this tool to identify where learning is already strong in your work and where new opportunities could grow. It can be used individually, in teams or across networks. If you wish to share your reflections of this tool and framework, please scan the PLACE QR code to access a reflection form.

Step 1. Reflect: How strong are these learning principles in your practice?

| Learning principles | 1 (low) | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (high) | Examples |
|--|------------|---|---|---|-------------|----------|
| Applied and practice-focused: learning is embedded in real work, testing and adapting in context | | | | | | |
| Collaborative & peer-based: learning with and from others | | | | | | |
| Culturally grounded: learning anchored in First Nations and diverse community cultural knowledge | | | | | | |
| Supported by capability frameworks: learning skills & pathways are clear and connected | | | | | | |
| Flexible and multimodal: learning adapts to context, readiness and need | | | | | | |
| Focussed on systems change: learning connects individual growth to collective capability for change | | | | | | |

Tip: Shade or select each cell (1–5) to create your own “heatmap” of learning strengths

Step 2. Reflect: How present are these learning enabling conditions in your work?

| Learning enablers | 1 (low) | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 (high) | Examples |
|---|------------|---|---|---|-------------|----------|
| Time: space to learn is protected | | | | | | |
| Trust: safe to test, adapt and share | | | | | | |
| Tools: practical supports and evidence for learning are available | | | | | | |
| Togetherness: relationships and peer networks are strong | | | | | | |
| Truth: First Nations cultural authority and knowledge, and diverse cultures and lived experiences is present | | | | | | |
| Trial: experimentation and iteration are encouraged | | | | | | |

Step 3. Review: What does your learning map show?

Look across your ratings to spot any patterns and insights:

- Where are your strongest areas? What's working well in your learning practice?

- Where might there be untapped potential or room to grow?

- What kinds of learning could help you deepen or expand these strengths (for example: peer exchange, co-design workshops, applied projects, coaching or First Nations-led learning)?

How would you like to use this reflection?

- *"Just for myself / my team"*: Choose one area you'd like to strengthen, either your own learning or your team's. Think of one small practical step you could take to explore or apply this in the next few months.
- *"I'm happy to share results with PLACE"*: Scan the PLACE QR code and share your reflections to help us co-create future learning opportunities and resources

