What is Collaborative Teacher Learning?

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Abstract

This chapter explains our definition of collaborative teacher learning. Issues about the meaning of learning are discussed and conclusions about the content and process of learning set out. The importance of four features of good practice in collaborative teacher learning is explained: namely, participative professionalism, deep level collaboration, equity and deep learning. Collaborative teacher learning is defined as teachers working together through purposeful interaction intended to advance their learning, based on participative and inclusive values and a commitment to expansive rather than test-led or performative conceptions of learning.

Key words:

- participative professionalism
- equity
- deep level collaboration
- deep learning
- distributed leadership

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Introduction

This chapter explains our understanding of collaborative teacher learning. It proceeds as follows. In the first section, fundamental issues concerning the content and process of learning are discussed before concluding with a definition of collaborative teacher learning. The second section elaborates on the values-stance that is an integral part of the definition by explaining four features of good practice.

1 Conceptualising collaborative teacher learning

1.1 Content of learning

To conceptualise collaborative teacher learning, it is necessary to consider the meaning of learning. Here we examine the content of learning – that is, the dimensions of ourselves that expand, grow or improve as we learn.

Cognitive learning. Learning is about expanding what we know in our heads. To see this as the entire scope of learning, however, is to adopt only the 'learning to know' pillar of learning, which provides 'the cognitive tools required to better comprehend the world and its complexities, and to provide an appropriate and adequate foundation for future learning' (see UNESCO WEBSITE). Cognitive learning is part of teacher learning, but there are additional dimensions to the content of such learning which we turn to now under the headings of affective learning and learning through practice.

Affective learning. Affective dimensions of learning include emotional awareness, values and personal characteristics and virtues such as confidence, courage and resilience. They relate to the increasingly influential idea of embodied learning in which self, body and mind are reconnected so the body is experienced 'as a source of effective knowledge, learning and healing potential' (Payne 2014: 1). These aspects of affective learning are discussed further in relation to deep learning below. For our purpose in this chapter, the term 'knowledge' includes cognitive and affective (emotional, ethical, social, and so on) learning.

Learning through practice. Crucially, learning is about teachers' practice too. It is about 'making a difference' (Frost, 2006): 'contributions to knowledge are manifest in … professional practice' (Frost 2014: 3). But it is not a one-way process - that is, practice is not simply the observable activities and procedures undertaken by teachers and directed by teachers' knowledge. This would be to see knowledge as a collection of authoritative propositions that are constructed from a

vantage point outside practice and used to direct practice; it would be to see knowledge as an instrument to solve problems. Instead, in our view, practice is an interconnected aspect of learning. The relationship between practice on the one hand and knowledge on the other is one of duality: it is a two-way process in which knowledge is used, developed and constructed as practice is enacted, with each affecting the other through an ongoing process of reciprocal influence.

CONCLUSION: In the daily process of teacher activity and professional development, learning is cognitive, affective and practical. It concerns what the teacher thinks, feels and does, and these aspects interconnect to constitute learning. This is consistent with an 'integrated approach to professional learning' that combines theory and practice (Menter and Mclaughlin 2015: 45).

1.2 Process of learning

The process of learning concerns how learning takes place. We discuss learning as both an individual and social process, and two contrasting pedagogical models.

An individual and emergent product. The individual teacher is active in their own learning. There are creative processes within the person, to which the teacher gives momentum, that lead to the growth of their knowledge and development of practice. This 'self-activity' involves the person deliberately and positively engaging in their own development and change (Uljens et al 2016), such as through internal reflection and personal enquiry by means of reading and use of other media. To this extent, learning is a product of the individual.

There is, however, much research evidence to suggest that focusing on the individual teacher omits crucial social and organisational factors: 'learning is embedded in the professional lives, working conditions and contexts that teachers inhabit … [and the school is] not only a site of learning but also a place that influences teachers' learning in significant ways' (Menter and McLaughlin 2015: 36). In short, knowing 'is something that people do together' (Gherardi 2009: 118). Research indicates that teachers (and other professionals) working together and with other stakeholders helps to advance learning - both professional learning and student learning. Effective professional learning involves, for example, engaging with specialist expertise from those 'who sit outside day to day routines, the immediate school environment and accountability systems and are thus well placed to provide objective information, challenge orthodoxies and create a sense of planned purpose for experimentation and risk taking', as well as peer support from colleague teachers providing emotional and moral support (Cordingley 2013: 25). Teacher learning can also benefit through working with students as co-creators of innovation and educational improvement. Leadership as a distributed and emergent process involving teachers as active agents of change

entails a continual flow of reciprocal learning: teachers facilitate learning in others and learn from others (Woods and Roberts 2018).

The learning generated is not confined to enhancing the learning of individuals. There is new learning that is emergent from the group or context and its physical and social resources. This may take the form of joint products, such as a specific artefact like a concept map or new knowledge that emerges from the 'co-construction and exchange of ideas' (Schoor et al 2015: 103, Weinberger et al 2007: 422). A group or network may also be seen as having a shared culture of knowledge and ideas (like Archer's {1995} emergent cultural structure in analytical dualism) and a collective capacity for creativity. Thus 'innovation and creativity are… products of social and networked environments' (Peters and Heraud 2015: 15).

Pedagogical models of learning. There are different conceptions of how learning comes to take place, reflecting different philosophical views of how we conceive of and are able to know the world. A still influential model is the **transmission model** of learning in which an authoritative holder of knowledge passes on that knowledge to a learner lacking in it. Also referred to as an 'acquisition model of learning', the teacher who is learning in this model is conceived as a passive recipient (Patchen and Crawford 2011: 288). The transmission model sits comfortably with a philosophical viewpoint that secure and authoritative knowledge can be generated about the world from an objective vantage point outside practice (as, for example, positivist epistemology promises).

A contrasting model is the **participative or constructivist model** of learning. In this, learners are actively engaged in working with others (teachers and other learners) in developing knowledge. Teacher learning, in this model, involves teachers being active co-creators of the knowledge they seek through their professional development. The participative model sits comfortably with a philosophical viewpoint that social phenomena, and knowledge about these, are socially created (constructivism) and that knowing about that world involves understanding people and the meanings they bring to it (interpretivism).

CONCLUSION: Learning is to some degree the outcome for the individual through their self-activity. Such individual self-activity, however, is embedded in a social context: interaction and exchanges of ideas between people circulate learning and both enhance individual learning and generate emergent learning such as joint products and new knowledge arising from the group, network or organisation. The participative model of learning accords well with seeing learning as an emergent product and teacher learning as being embedded in the social, professional and

organisational context of teachers. It is the more convincing model to frame thinking and practice about collaborative teacher learning.

1.3 Defining collaborative teacher learning

Various labels are used to describe ways in which teachers work with others to develop their professional learning - for example, specialist, collaborative or peer coaching, collaborative enquiry, and joint practice development (Cordingley 2013). Collaborative teacher learning is conceptualised in our project as teachers working together through purposeful processes of interaction intended to advance teachers' learning. Working together can extend beyond teachers to collaborating with students, support staff, community members and other educational stakeholders. Collaborative teacher learning is further defined for us by incorporating an explicit values-stance that makes clear that worthwhile collaboration involves participative and inclusive values and a commitment to expansive rather than test-led or performative conceptions of learning. The values-stance integrated into this conceptualisation is explained further in the next section.

Collaborative teacher learning overlaps with the notion of teacher leadership where teachers are active agents of change working with others as the initiators and enactors of innovation (Woods and Roberts 2018). Teachers in this conception of collaborative working are not simply passive recipients and transmitters of local, regional and national educational policy, but active interpreters and shapers at school level of policy (Ward et al 2015).

As noted above, the learning generated by collaborative teacher learning may enhance individual learning and generate emergent learning in the form of joint products and new knowledge emergent from the group, network or organisation. Hence, collaborative teacher learning does not imply the absence of individual self-activity and learning. It is distinct from what we term individual-focused teacher learning - by which we mean action by an individual teacher that is solely to advance that teacher's learning and does not involve purposeful working with one or more others to this end.

CONCLUSION: Collaborative teacher learning is teachers working together through purposeful processes of interaction intended to advance teachers' learning, based on participative and inclusive values and a commitment to expansive rather than test-led or performative conceptions of learning.

2 Features of Good Practices in Collaborative Teacher Learning

2.1 Good practice

This section elaborates on the values-stance that is an integral part of the definition just put forward. It does this through a discussion of good practice and by setting out four features that we suggest are essential components of such practice.

There are different meanings of good practice. A technicist approach to good practice considers that a practice's benefits can be measured by identifiable and distinct effects (arising in a linear fashion from the practice) and by objective, often quantitative, data, and that the practice can be communicated to other practitioners, who implement it in their own location following defined procedures. This viewpoint sits comfortably with seeing knowledge as an instrument to solve problems, rather than an integral aspect of practice as discussed above in relation to learning through practice.

The technicist approach tends to be associated with a particular conception of teacher professionalism, one that is defined by the principles and goals of performative governance and is dominant in much educational policy. This has been called 'managerial professionalism', which is committed to achieving corporate goals and standardised measures of success (Day and Sachs 2004: 6).

A technicist approach, however, fails to recognise that assessing benefits, sharing knowledge of practices and applying them in diverse contexts is much more complex. Constituting a practice as 'good' involves profound questions about, *inter alia*, the values informing the practice, the different priorities, culture and histories of schools and their communities which may affect assessment of what constitutes good practice, and from whose perspective the practice is being judged as good.

Alternatives to managerialism argue for expanding the narrow focus of results-based measures and for recognising the importance of pluralism, broader values of social justice and sustainability, and negotiating meanings and relationships (Osborne 2010: 10, 423-424). This is consistent with a discourse of 'democratic professionalism' which 'seeks to demystify professional work and build alliances between teachers and excluded constituencies of students and members of the community on whose behalf decisions have traditionally been made either by professions or the state' (Day and Sachs 2004: 7).

Rejecting the technicist and managerialist perspective as too narrow, in this project four features of collaborative teacher learning were formulated to guide the identification and examination of cases of good practice. These four features are

- participative professionalism
- deep level collaboration
- equity
- deep learning.

These are explained in turn.

2.2 Participative professionalism

This is about to how teachers carry out their role as teachers and the ideas and models of practice and relationships that are expressed in their professional practice. The debate about teacher professionalism is a continuing one and orbits around 'the simple question of whether the role of the teacher is that of some kind of technician who simply "delivers" the curriculum or as a professional who helps to create it… in a process that is creative, critical and active' (Frost 2006: 20).

Participative professionalism describes a participatory or democratic model of professionalism in which teachers exercise agency, co-lead innovation and work with others collegially. This model does not see the teacher as a technician or implementer of technicist cases of good practice. Teachers are seen as pro-active mobilisers and creators of knowledge and interpreters of local, regional and national educational policy: they are co-leaders of change, engaging in teacher leadership and 'distributed leadership for equity and learning' (Woods and Roberts 2015).

DEFINITION OF PARTICIPATIVE PROFESSIONALISM: a democratic model of professionalism in which teachers exercise agency, co-lead innovation and work with others collegially.

2.3 Deep level collaboration

This highlights the cultural and institutional structures that help to sustain and give depth to collaborative teacher learning. Research suggests that a weakness of teacher collaboration is that it often does not involve sufficient probing into methods of teaching, mutual observation of practice and critical examination of teaching, and that it can consist of an aggregate of individuals with little structure (Vangrieken et al 2015). Structured collaboration, on the other hand, displays a depth of critical enquiry that includes 'sharing evidence about both teachers' and pupils' learning, making it more visible and thus open to review. … [I]t is only when professional learning conversations are

rooted in both trying out new approaches (thus disturbing the status quo) and exploring evidence from those experiments that these conversations have benefits for pupils' (Cordingley 2014: 45).

Deep level collaboration is characterised by cultural and institutional features that nourish and sustain collaborative teacher learning. Culturally, these may be manifest - in a team, group, school or community - in a number of ways: for example, as shared expectations and a strong collective identity as active collaborators in leading change; as learning made visible through being shared, which includes ideas, research and stories of practice being circulated so as to illuminate the processes and results of collaborative learning; and a collective commitment to critical reflection (Frost 2013, 2014). Institutionally, these supports may include regular meetings, collective events and ways of organising group working that make space for collaborative teacher learning, as well as arrangements that give access to resources that enable such regular interaction and innovative change.

DEFINITION OF DEEP LEVEL COLLABORATION: collaborative activity that is nourished and sustained by cultural and institutional features such as shared expectations, strong collective identity, shared visible learning encouraging critical reflection, and forms of regular meetings, collective events and ways of organising group working that make space for collaborative teacher learning.

2.4 Equity

It cannot be assumed that relationships between participants in the participative model of professionalism will be automatically equal or fair. Power and status differences are a feature of distributed leadership in schools and a willingness to reflect on these critically and tackle unfairnesses is essential (Woods 2016; in press).

A conception of social justice is needed that brings out the different dimensions of injustice that occur in schools. This is provided by a four-fold framework of the ways of advancing social justice, which involves tackling inequalities in respect and recognition of cultural differences (cultural justice), opportunities to have a voice and contribute to decisions (participative justice), opportunities and support for learning (developmental justice), and unjustified socio-economic inequalities and their negative effects (distributive justice) (Woods and Roberts 2018).

DEFINITION OF EQUITY: the furthering of equal opportunities for learning, mutual respect, participation and the lessening of unjustified socio-economic inequalities and their negative effects.

2.5 Deep learning

Different views of the nature and purpose of learning can be taken. How learning is viewed influences what is seen as good practice in collaborative teacher learning. If learning - both by teachers and students - is not be narrowed to meet test-led or performative conceptions of learning, it is important to articulate a more expansive view. This is what the conception of deep learning does. Such learning enhances self-awareness, critical thinking, autonomy and the process of becoming a person in the sense of 'developing the virtues, values and capacity for reason that enable us to live the "good life" and to take our places in the public sphere' (Frost and Roberts 2011: 68). It can be seen as encompassing holistic learning that involves the development of all our human capabilities - cognitive, affective and practical, including ethical, social, spiritual, aesthetic and physical capabilities (Woods and Roberts 2018).

Deep learning encapsulates the wide range of dimensions that constitute teachers' professional learning. Professional learning includes learning what it means to be a member of the teaching profession (socialisation); enhancing capabilities (for collaborative teacher learning and co-leading innovation, for example); developing critical thinking; reflecting on values such as social justice, integrity, trust and respect; and understanding educational policy and issues such as sustainability (see Forde et al 2015 for example).

DEFINITION OF DEEP LEARNING: learning that includes development of all our human capabilities (cognitive, affective and practical, including ethical and social capabilities) and the capacity for critical thinking, as well as a sense of autonomy and belonging.

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