Why Is Collaborative Teacher Learning Important?

Mika Risku and Matti Pennanen, Institute of Educational Leadership, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Abstract

This chapter probes the question of why collaborative teacher learning is important. The central scope here is that of organisations and people in organisations in a changing world. The chapter starts with a brief summary of collaborative teacher learning from the perspective of organisations, based on the related definition in the previous chapter (EFFeCT paper: *What is Collaborative Teacher Learning?*). This definition is then examined in relation to the changing world and its demands on learning. Finally, we look into how organisations and their learning ways should evolve to meet the demands. As an overall answer, we conclude in favour of collaborative learning.

Key words:

- adult education
- collaborative learning
- operational environment
- organization
- paradigm shift

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Introduction

In the previous chapter, we focused on defining collaborative teacher learning as a concept in relation to the various approaches to teacher learning. In this chapter, we concentrate on describing why we define teacher learning as we do and, based on this, why we consider that collaborative teacher learning is important. The essential message is that the world is changing in ways that increasingly demand individual learning to connect with organisational learning for organisations, and with their members, to meet the demands of the changes.

We will start by summarising the definition of collaborative teacher learning from the point of view of organisations. Then we will reflect on the definition in relation to the changing world and its demands on learning from the perspective of organisations and their members. These reflections we will then use to describe how organisations and their members, as well as their learning, should evolve to meet the demands. This evolution, we claim, has to be based on collaborative learning and on organisations supporting the collaborative learning of its members and of itself as an entity.

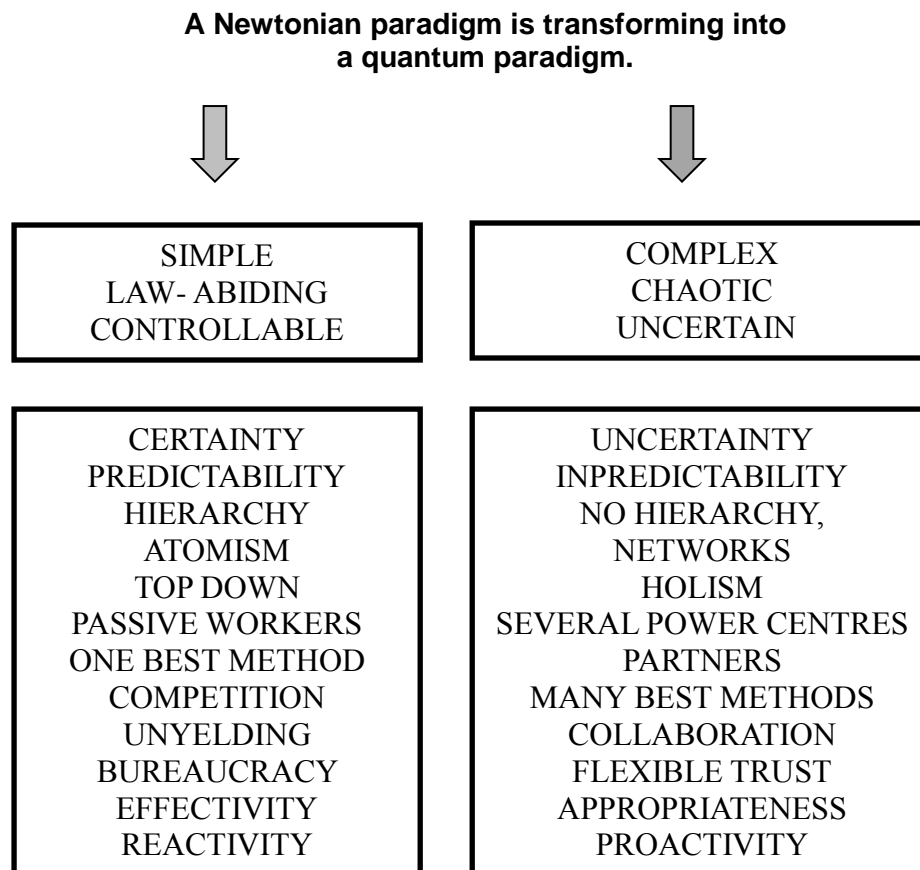## 1 Defining collaborative teacher learning from the perspective of organisations

In the EFFeCT project, we perceive collaborative teacher learning processes to take place in their socio-cultural contexts. In addition, we understand collaborative teacher learning to include the development of knowledge, emotions and practice. Furthermore, we regard learning as the outcomes of individuals' self-activities that take place in interaction that comprises of purposeful processes all aimed at supporting teachers' learning, based on participative and inclusive values and dedication. Finally, we believe that successful collaborative teacher learning is built on participative professionalism and deep levels of collaboration in professional communities, nourishing equity and reaching for deep learning.

1.1 The changing world is changing organisations and learning

Our definition of collaborative teacher learning states that teachers' learning takes place in their socio-cultural contexts. These socio-cultural contexts include teachers' professional operational environments: classrooms, schools, local provisions of education and national education systems. They are in turn located in local communities, school districts and/or municipalities, regions and nations. These, however, also involve private and public organisations representing all fields of society. Furthermore, the entire above increasingly interconnects in various trans-national settings that have a share in the redefining of local,

national and multi-national organisations' missions, visions and strategies in terms of whether the organisations represent education or other fields of society.

Zohar (1997) claims that our world is experiencing such a fundamental change that we can talk about a paradigm shift. In this shift, our basic mind-set is challenged to radically renew itself to meet the demands that the changes in our socio-cultural context impose on us. For these changes, please, see *Figure 1*.

A Newtonian paradigm is transforming into a quantum paradigm.

SIMPLE LAW- ABIDING CONTROLLABLE	COMPLEX CHAOTIC UNCERTAIN
CERTAINTY PREDICTABILITY HIERARCHY ATOMISM TOP DOWN PASSIVE WORKERS ONE BEST METHOD COMPETITION UNYELDING BUREAUCRACY EFFECTIVITY REACTIVITY	UNCERTAINTY INPREDICTABILITY NO HIERARCHY, NETWORKS HOLISM SEVERAL POWER CENTRES PARTNERS MANY BEST METHODS COLLABORATION FLEXIBLE TRUST APPROPRIATENESS PROACTIVITY

Figure 1. Paradigm shift (Zohar, 1997; summative figure Risku, 2002)

The changes shown here demand that we learn how to develop ourselves and our actions in an operational environment that is in several ways the opposite of what we have been used to. The challenge is intensified by the fact that as we try to learn how to manage in the new operational environment, its structures, processes and practices are still often those of the old ways. As a result, we have to develop while we try to learn. Due to the nature of the new operational environment, our solitary learning is no longer sufficient; learning has to be collaborative.

Even small changes can affect organisations but the ones connected with the paradigm shift are radical and multiply the effects in both quantity and quality. This is because

organisations behave as organic systems (Snyder, Acker-Hocevar & Snyder, 2000). The concept of organic systems is originally based on Bertalanffy's (1968) system theory according to which organisations are open systems that interact with their environments and cannot be understood nor led in isolation of this connection (Morgan, 1987). In addition, we cannot construct organisations in a universally fixed manner. An offspring of the system theory, contingency theory, explicitly states that different environments pre-suppose different kinds of arrangement (Lawrence & Lorsche 1986; Mintzberg, 1979; see also Burns & Stalker, 1961).

The complex world of the quantum paradigm with its many power-centres and networks ranging from local to trans-national levels, emphasises the notion of the context as a socio-cultural entity, as we have described it in our definition for collaborative teacher learning. In the quantum paradigm, organisations and their members work together in constantly evolving arrangements. Thanks to modern online platforms, organisations increasingly connect with each other in everyday virtual face-to-face 'meetings', wherever they are in our sphere of operation and whatever socio-cultural contexts they have.

In fact, the world's most admired companies are already global (Fortune (2017)) and the number of companies operating online is rapidly growing (eMarketer, 2016). Increasingly, companies are also functioning as and within networks (Bersin, Pelster, Schwarts & van der Vayer, 2017). However, companies are not alike, also in terms of how they evolve, i.e. they vary significantly as well. It is important to note that many of the most successful global companies intentionally emphasise acting locally (Forbes, 2013). In addition, the mass centres of global companies appear to be in motion all the time regardless of whether the companies have local operations or not (Hay Group, 2014).

Based on the above, one can claim that whether an organisation is local or global, it has to take into consideration various socio-cultural contexts. However, these considerations must reach even deeper, to all individual members of organisations. Research in organisational culture shows that each member of an organisation interprets various everyday things called 'artefacts' that become factors in the processes of organisations giving them their own meanings, including their cognitive, affective and practical interpretations (Hatch, 1997; Sergiovanni and Corbally, 1984; Smircich, 1983). These interpretations inform how we see organisations and thus how we consider our roles and how we work within them. It is also noteworthy that an individual member of an organisation can simultaneously share the meanings of several groups within his/her organisation (Aaltio-Marjosola, 1997; Antikainen, 198; Lahtero & Risku, 2014).

Furthermore, our definition of collaborative teacher learning includes individuals' self-activity to interact in purposeful processes that aim to provide supportive teachers' learning based on participative and inclusive values and dedication. This resonates well with the demands of the quantum paradigm for proactivity, collaboration and partnership.

According to the resource-agency duality model of distributed leadership, individuals' self-activity is needed if we wish to establish resources for organisations. On the other hand, self-activity allows individuals to influence their organisations and their members. This in turn creates complex power relations amongst the members, who conceive their organisations in their own individual ways. (Tian, Collin & Risku, 2016). To avoid harmful power conflicts it is necessary to base collaborative teacher learning and teachers' self-activity on participative and inclusive values and dedication, as our definition of collaborative teacher learning states. This includes renewing missions, visions and strategies collaboratively to guide and develop educational institutions to meet the demands of the changing operational environment.

1.2 Questions for you to reflect on by yourself and with your professional community.

1. Based on *Figure 1* concerning the paradigm shift, how has your own operational environment changed during the last few years? What changes do you anticipate for the future?

2. How have the changes in the operational environment changed your classroom methodologies and how has the work of your school changed during the last years? What changes do you anticipate for the future?
    a. What kind of socio-cultural contexts and changes in them did you identify?
    b. What 'open system' elements of your classrooms and school do you identify?
    c. In which ways do you think your own classrooms and school have to have their own unique arrangements?

3. How do you and your colleagues enact self-activity to support teachers' learning?
    a. What purposes does the self-activity serve?
    b. What kind of participation did you identify?
    c. What kind of inclusive values and dedication appeared to direct processes?
    d. What kind of power conflicts do you note?
    e. Do you think you could manage in your operational environment without collaborative teacher learning? Why/why not?

2 Organisations and their learning methods seeking to meet the demands of the changing world

In this chapter, we hope to justify our view of the importance of collaborative teacher learning from the perspective of organisations because we all work in organisations. In most cases, legislation also obligates education providers to provide education and they define teachers' roles for the provisions in their local ordinances (for example in Finland, the Basic Education Act, 1998/628).

Whatever our organisation is like, it usually has a shared mission to fulfil, an agreed vision into which to evolve, and outlined strategies covering how to try to reach the vision. In line with these aims, all the members of the organisation are expected to work. Most often organisations also comprise of several people, and solo-operator organisations do not operate in isolation either.

In the paradigm shift, learning has to be understood as a strategic tool that, besides the individual members of the organisation, also touches the organisation itself. Increasingly, the demands of the new operational environment oblige all organisations to reform their structures, processes and practices in ways that no single person can manage in isolation. As for Finland, the Basic Education Act (1998/628) mandates several student care issues to be handled by cross-sectoral multi-member organs. The Finnish Basic Education Core Curriculum (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet, 2014) in turn requires teachers to collaborate to provide students with multi-disciplinary learning modules.

Collaborative teacher learning is needed both to meet legislation's demands as such and to learn how to do this. In addition, collaborative learning does not stop with teachers but has to be extended to other people working in student care services, to educational leaders and to parents and students. Using Finland as an example again, students' support systems are based on their teachers' pedagogical assessments arranged in collaboration with cross-secular student care professionals, parents and students (Basic Education Act, 1998/628). How this process takes place requires the collaborative learning of them all and also that of the educational leaders so that the structures, processes and practices enable and support the obligation. Teachers simply cannot co-teach multi-disciplinary learning modules without the structures, processes and practices of their schools enabling and supporting it.

Collaborative learning, reaching from individuals to whole organisations, is the key to us meeting the needs of the changing world. Being able to construct, enact and develop this kind of collaborative learning is fundamental for educational institutions for two main

reasons: they need this for their own operations and they have the obligation to educate their students to construct similar learning methods in their own (future) working places. Collaborative learning is not solely an issue for schools but for all organisations.

To meet the demands for learning demanded by the changes in the operational environment, organisations are, according to Aalto, Ahokas and Kuosa (2008, p. 34), going through a transformation from being authority models via a discursive to having organic status as presented in *Figure 2*. The transformation resembles the changes included in the paradigm shift offered by Zohar (1997) regarding the changing world. Hopefully, the description of the transformation can be used as a self-evaluation guide to direct one's own organisation and its learning more towards being an organisation which meets the demands of the changing world.

Developing oneself, one's organisation and the range of members (to evolve based on the transformation chart) is likely to be a long-term process. However, what seems to be typical of the new operational environment is that besides being able to make fundamental changes, organisations also have to be able to make the changes swiftly and with agility (Kotter, 2014). For example, in Finland, 90% of directors of municipal provisions of education predicted in 2008 that the way they provide education would radically have altered in the period up to 2016. Most of the new ways of providing education were based on processes based on collaboration and networking of various forms. (Kanervio & Risku, 2009).

Authority model	**Discursive model**	**Organic model**
• Learning by heart • Top-down monologue • Teaching order and discipline • Physical work • Running condition important • Master-journeyman model • Monotony	• Application of information • Discussion and debate • Critical thinking • Self-acquisition of information • Learning to learn • ICT skills • Interaction and equality • Design and expertise	• Networking skills • Skill to construct information collaboratively • Changing rules and information • Talent understood as trainable capability • Network entrepreneurship • Contact teaching has to be justified

Figure 2. Evolvement of paradigms for learning (Aalto, Ahokas & Kuosa 2008, p. 34; translation by Risku, 2017)

Early childhood, basic, upper secondary and higher education will no doubt do its best to evolve as organisations and educate their students to meet the collaborative learning demands of the new operational environment. However, according to Risku and Tian (2017) the necessary pace for the societal transformation of learning is so acutely overdue that their provision will not be sufficient.

Adult education in its various forms must have a stronger role than ever to support individual professionals and their organisations to evolve into professional communities of collaborative learning. Both educational institutions and all other organisations need this support from adult education. In addition to this, adult education also has to be able to renew itself to meet the demands of the new operational environment.

At its core, this is what our EFFeCT project was about. In the project, we experimented in various settings, with different target groups and for many kinds of challenges, seeking to discover what collaborative teacher learning could be and do. We came up with the definition as described in chapter 2.1., and, in the following chapters, you can find further reflections and material for your own development work on collaborative teacher learning based on the various experiments in the EFFeCT project.

Our Czech partners experimented and developed collaborative teacher learning by creating a collaborative flow with a bottom-up approach from practitioners combined with a top-down one based on the national framework. The Finnish sub-project included several layers ranging from cross-municipality processes hoping to create synergies and platforms for collaboration amongst teachers, educational leaders and education providers as well as to establish national structures, processes and practices to enable peer-mentoring amongst principals and municipal directors of education. In Hungary, schoolteachers looked for new pedagogical solutions with the help of their school leaders to develop local communities. The Irish team established a network called SCoTENS to provide a forum for various organisations (colleges, universities, councils and trade unions) and stakeholders to support the development of teacher education. The Latvian experiment worked to reduce the problems in rural areas through collaboration of different school levels. In the United Kingdom, the HertsCam network experimented on creating lateral and hierarchical collaboration amongst various actors in the education system.

2.1 Questions for you to reflect on by yourself and with your professional community.

1. What kind of legislative obligations for collaborative work do you have in your own work? What kind of collaborative learning do you think such obligations demand and from whom?

2. Based on *Figure 2*, at which transformation phase would you locate your own school?

    a. What kind of elements for the selected phase did you identify?

b. How well do you think the elements correspond to the needs of the students, local community and your school - in terms of fulfilling a mission?

c. What do you think should be done in the future?

3. How would you evaluate your own, your colleagues' and your school's capacity for collaborative learning?

a. What capacity did you identify?

b. What needs for improvement did you recognise?

c. How well do adult education providers support the evolvement of collaborative teacher learning in your school?

d. What should take place in the professional development of your school so that it can best support collaborative teacher learning in your school?

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