

Principles of Collaborative Teacher Learning

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Abstract

This chapter puts forward principles that help in developing and sustaining collaborative teacher learning. They foster conditions and actions that generate a synergy between the individual freedom of the teacher to think critically and act with some autonomy in service of learning and the collective freedom of teachers to work together and achieve shared aims to which they have committed themselves. These principles encapsulate the kinds of values and aims which guide policies and the everyday interactions that give rise to successful collaborative teacher learning. Formulated within the framework of the four features of good practice set out in Chapter 2.1, the principles are guides intended to stimulate and orientate reflection, enquiry and action. They are interpreted, negotiated and made real in distinctive ways by teachers and others in local settings through their practice. The principles can also be used to evaluate the state of collaborative teacher learning in a given setting by asking to what degree they are being enacted.

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Introduction

This chapter puts forward principles that are important for creating the conditions and guiding actions that help collaborative teacher learning to take place and work well. The value of freedom to enact agency 'characterised by questioning and an informed degree of self-determination' is a fundamental theme (Woods and Roberts 2018: 2). Where there is a successful culture of collaboration and mutual support, based on these principles, individual freedom and collective freedom work in synergy. The individual freedom of educators and learners to think and act for themselves in the service of learning enhances and is enhanced by their collective freedom - that is, their working together through creative and collaborative relationships to achieve shared aims to which they have committed themselves and to guide and interpret policy.

We define principles as values and aims which guide local interactions and are significant in enabling collaborative teacher learning to emerge. The principles in the chapter are not a comprehensive set, but ones that have emerged from the process of case study analysis and discussions and feedback through the project. They do not form a blueprint or a set of rules for effective collaborative teacher learning. Our proposition is that where collaborative teacher learning works well, these principles encapsulate the kinds of values and aims likely to be guiding the policies and everyday interactions that give rise to collaborative teacher learning. They are guides intended to stimulate and orientate reflection, enquiry and action aimed at creating or enhancing successful collaboration. The principles are interpreted, negotiated and made real in distinctive ways by teachers and others in local settings through their practice of collaboration. They can also be used to evaluate the state of collaborative teacher learning in a given setting by asking to what degree the principles are being enacted.

The principles have been formulated within the framework of the four features set out in Chapter 2.1. Before putting forward the principles, the complexity of phenomena such as collaborative teacher learning is highlighted.

Complexity

Putting the principles into practice is not a linear process of intent followed by action. Numerous contextual factors - national, cultural, regional, local and at school level - impact upon plans and efforts to forge collaboration. These affect things like the resources, relationships and culture of expectations, values and ideas in the settings in which collaborative teacher learning takes place. The kind of collaboration and learning that is created emerges from a myriad of local interactions.

What unfolds, as complexity theory suggests, is significantly affected by unpredictable outcomes arising from these ongoing interactions.

This can be likened to the neuron web in the brain. Neurons are cells within the nervous system which transmit information to other nerve cells. They are part of a web of connection, but do not touch one another. Instead they form tiny gaps across which they pass signals to bring about thought or activity. This notion of interconnection acknowledges the interrupted nature of connection. The interruption in each gap or space across which signals pass is itself important for the thoughts or actions which subsequently occur.

If we think of collaboration as having something of this character of the neuron web, signals relating to collaboration vary widely in their nature. They include signals of meaning, intent or emotion; signals that convey information, questions, support, doubt or other communications; signals arising from participants' perceptions of their context, which includes the group they are part of, the institutional arrangements, patterns of interconnection and the physical dimensions of the setting. Interruptions similarly are myriad in nature, as signals criss-cross the gaps and spaces and affect (or interrupt) each other. Consequently, there are both patterns of interaction and there is unpredictability in collaboration, due to the vast number of variables and the web of intense and countless interconnections in continuous operation.

The principles explained below highlight key aspects of practice that tend to help in making collaborative teacher learning possible and effective. Facilitators of collaboration - teachers, school leaders, policy-makers, students and others - can translate them into action that is appropriate to the context of practice. The principles need to be interpreted locally and consideration given to how local factors may affect them (Roberts and Woods 2017: 158-159). Rather than being capable of a neat process of implementation, in the spirit of the metaphor of the neuron web, principles in practice are 'messy' and require continual reflection and flexibility by participants as practice unfolds.

Principles

Principles fostering participative professionalism

participative professionalism: a democratic model of professionalism in which teachers exercise agency, co-lead innovation and work with others collegially

The focus of participative professionalism is on the agency of teachers - how they view (or model in their minds) their purpose and the ways in which they go about their professional practice. It

concerns how they think and feel about, and how they practice, professional learning. Participative professionalism sees teachers as professionals who value and practice the freedom to enact agency themselves and with others. The model of leadership that is inherent in participative professionalism is, therefore, one that views leadership differently than a traditional model in which leadership is seen as entirely or predominantly a top-down process undertaken by designated senior leaders. A model more conducive to participative professionalism is that of collaborative leadership. In this model, leadership is seen as being both distributed (emerging from 'the perpetual process of complex interactions' across the school involving not only school leaders but teachers, support staff, students and others) and shaped by individual intentions which express 'meaning, purpose and goals' and the will to make a difference; and it has an explicit value-base so leadership practice is guided by values of co-development in which progress is achieved 'with and by helping others' as co-creators of the learning environment of the school (Woods and Roberts 2018: 126). Participative professionalism values the non-positional leadership of teachers and others: it understands the value of collaboration and the initiation and implementation of innovation by teachers, and equally the value of collaboration between teachers and others with a stake and involvement in education - which includes students, support staff, parents and others - and their collaborative participation in leadership of innovation.

The principles below reflect this view of teachers as pro-active agents of change. Teachers in participative professionalism are not passive recipients of ideas or the values of their profession and education. Critical thinking is an essential component of the practice of professional learning. Values are authored by teachers through critical reflection. Cases from the project show the importance of values clarification in which participants explore their own priorities and values and what they feel is the most important area of practice where change is needed in order to improve learning. Given the longstanding power of the idea of the strong leader, another key process in freeing the agency of teachers as co-leaders of innovation, is that of reframing leadership (Woods et al 2016: 63-66 Dimensions of learning and reframing). This involves moving out of the traditional frame of reference in which leadership is seen as predominantly a top-down exercise, and creating a new perspective that sees leadership as distributed and collaborative and as a process of facilitating change with and enabling co-agents of innovation - colleague teachers, students and others (Woods et al 2016: 5-7, 17-18, 28-29, 42-43, 58-59 Participative professionalism; Woods and Roberts 2018: Chapters 1, 4, 5).

Principles: Participative professionalism is fostered when the following happens.

1. Developing teachers' agency is prioritised by facilitators of collaborative teacher learning so teachers are freed to initiate change.

2. Values are clarified and authored by participants through their exploration of their own priorities and what they want to make a difference to.
3. There is shared purpose and a focus on aspects of practice about which teachers feel passionate.
4. Teachers work with others in the leadership of innovation (with colleague teachers as well as students, support staff, senior leaders, parents and so on).
5. Leadership by teachers is collaborative and aimed at facilitating change with others, rather than adopting the traditional frame of reference in which leadership is seen as predominantly a top-down exercise and about instructing others.
6. Teachers develop both an individual identity, which promotes confidence and critical thinking as agents of change, and a collective identity, which promotes collective efficacy and belonging.

Principles fostering deep level collaboration

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

The focus of deep level collaboration is on the structures and roots that nourish and sustain collaborative teacher learning and participative professionalism. These enable those involved in collaborative teacher learning to ask penetrating questions about practice and its improvement and to facilitate the active participation of others with a range of different viewpoints and experiences. Deep level collaboration displays characteristics such as mutual support, a cohesive culture and sense of belonging, and an embedded commitment to discussion and critical examination of pedagogy, educational aims and ways of enhancing teachers' practice. Hence the principles below focus on enduring features such as institutional frameworks and cultures and the importance of strategies that nourish durable resources such as capabilities for collaboration and a shared identity.

Rather than the surface level collaboration which often results from including collaborators late in the life of a project, deep level collaboration sees teachers inviting collaborators to join them in the initial project thinking, planning and shaping. This helps to create a group identity and patterns of joint working which become a supportive resource for individual and collective freedom to initiate change. Working alongside others to develop practices which are authored by all becomes a shared tenet of professional practice and so part of the culture. Such practice can then lead to the

creation of professional knowledge which is both personally and institutionally transformational (Woods et al 2016: 7-8, 18-19, 29-40, 43-44, 59 Deep level collaboration).

Principles: Deep level collaboration is fostered when the following happens.

1. Institutional and cultural structures are created that nourish and sustain collaborative teacher learning; these include establishing structures that bring teachers together so as to enable collaboration (such as teacher-led groups), shared norms, a collegial ethos and knowledge resources (the fund of ideas, stories of collaborative practice, research literature, information and visible learning that teachers and others have access to and share).
2. Strategies of change are pursued that contribute to a sustained transition to a collaborative culture; These strategies, involving all who collaborate, include
 - values clarification (in which participants explore their own priorities and what they want to make a difference to)
 - reframing leadership (from a traditional frame of reference to one that sees leadership as distributed and collaborative)
 - developing capabilities (for pro-active agency, constructive and open exchange, developing and sustaining community, and reciprocal learning (Woods and Roberts 2018: Chapter 10)
3. There is both top-down support from senior leaders and distributed, self-organising agency (individual and collective freedom) by teachers and others who exercise non-positional leadership (Woods 2016; Woods and Roberts 2018: Chapter 9).
4. It is recognised that change and collaboration involve emotional (as well as cognitive) learning, commitment and intelligence.
5. There are processes of collective identity construction in which the collective (a group, department, school, network of schools or community) develops a shared feeling for and understanding of what it means to be a pro-active teacher (or student or other stakeholder) bringing about change through collaborative practice.
6. Collective identity, and the culture it helps to create, values critical and independent-minded thinking as well as collective responsibility.

Principles fostering equity

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

Differences in power and status tend to hinder learning. For example, they distract participants from getting the most from collaboration and sharing knowledge, as participants may give attention to protecting their interests against feared consequences from more powerful collaborators or they may be intimidated or excessively deferential to those who have greater authority or status (Bunderson and Reagans 2011). As well as having a detrimental effect on individual freedom to be fully engaged in learning, the loss of learning affects all, both the more and less powerful, and hence collective freedom to engage, because ideas, questioning and the sharing of knowledge do not flow freely (Bunderson and Reagans 2011; Woods and Roberts 2018: Chapter 5). Power differences and social injustice can occur amongst teachers and between different stakeholders due to status inequalities or a lack of recognition of different kinds of authority. For example, newly qualified teachers may be accorded less professional authority because of their lack of experience, although they may have or develop particular expertise in innovative aspects of pedagogy; teachers without designated senior leadership roles may be inhibited from initiating change where the general expectation is that senior leaders do this and there has been no reframing of how leadership is understood (Woods 2016: in press).

In addressing inequalities, it is important for schools to develop an understanding of how inequality is understood, as well as to build up the capacity to recognise and explore different approaches to tackling inequality and be willing to address sensitive issues and monitor and evaluate inequality (Lumby and Coleman 2016). It helps to grasp the range of social justice issues by distinguishing four dimensions: 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). The principles below reinforce the importance of explicitly addressing equity in relation to aims, process and outcomes (Woods et al 2016: 9-10, 19-20, 30-31, 44, 59-60 Equity).

Principles: Equity is fostered when the following happens.

1. Equity aims are clear:
 - Advancing equity is made an explicit aim of teachers' collaborative practice.
 - Attention is given to the different aspects of equity - respect, participation, fair opportunities for learning and the impact of socio-economic inequalities.
2. The process of collaboration is examined critically from an equity perspective:
 - Attention is given to surfacing power and power differences.
 - Variations in access to opportunities to participate in collaborative teacher learning are looked for and examined.

- Practice and innovation are examined from a range of viewpoints and critical questions are encouraged.
- 3. Outcomes are examined from an equity perspective.
- 4. Improvements in practice are made as a result of (1), (2) and (3).

Principles fostering deep learning

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

In thinking about what makes collaborative teacher learning successful, a view has to be taken on what kind of learning is good and to be valued. The view taken here is that focusing on learning for tests or performative measures of school outcomes, and on professional learning that prioritises this, offers too shallow a perspective. A broader conception of learning is offered by the idea of deep learning, which enhances self-awareness, critical thinking, autonomy and fosters holistic growth as a person who develops the virtues, values and capabilities of a democratic citizen and, for teachers, a member of a profession dedicated to education.

The principles below guide attention to the dimensions of learning discussed in Chapter 2.1: cognitive and affective learning, as well as learning for and through practice (Woods et al 2016: 10-12, 20-22, 31-38, 44-49, 60-66 Deep learning)..

Principles: Deep learning is fostered when the following happens.

1. Teachers' collaborative practice is committed to nurturing a breadth of learning that includes cognitive, emotional and social development as members of a community of professionals, as well as the predisposition and capacity to think independently and critically as an individual.
2. Learning is recognised as reciprocal rather than one-way.
3. Learning is made visible through teachers articulating and sharing new knowledge, by such means as shared stories of practice.
4. Problems are made visible so challenges are brought out for examination and action, creating the 'grit' that aids the learning process.
5. Critical reflexivity is encouraged that invites viewpoints from different stakeholders and their experiences of innovation and asks testing questions about the evidence for learning and the assumptions and values influencing practice.

6. Learning is fed from a variety of sources, including publicly available resources, especially published research literature, and the visible learning generated by teachers and others.
7. Learning is through and for practice, recognising that knowledge is used, developed and constructed as practice is enacted.

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