

# **Opportunities and Limitations for Teacher Learning within Teachers' Collaboration in Teams – Perspectives from Action Learning**

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## **Abstract**

During the last two decades, in research circles there has been a widespread belief in, and several attempts to point out, that teachers' learning and innovations in practice are considerably improved by teachers' collaboration in professional communities of practice. Relying primarily on interviews with teachers, this paper discusses teachers' learning within teachers' collaboration in teams. One particular approach to such collaboration is the participation of teacher teams in action learning processes which is the perspective represented in this paper. The paper also examines some of the methodological dilemmas connected with studying and investigating teachers' learning.

Keywords: Teacher learning; Collaboration in teams; Interviews with teachers; Action learning; Methodological dilemmas; Observations of classroom practice

During the last two decades, in research circles there has been a widespread belief, and several attempts to point out, that teachers' learning and innovations in practice are considerably improved by teachers' collaboration in what is usually termed as professional communities of practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999; Little 1990, 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert 2001, 2006; Talbert 1995; Westheimer 1998). Researchers posit that teachers' teaching and learning are improved by teachers' collective efforts to examine and reflect on practice and according to McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) mainstream research also tend to support the following conclusions:

Researchers agree that teachers learn best when they are involved in activities that: (a) focus on instruction and student learning specific to the settings in which they teach; (b) are sustained and continuous, rather than episodic; (c) provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues inside and outside the school; (d) reflect teachers' influence about what and how they learn; and (e) help teachers develop theoretical understanding of the skills and knowledge they need to learn (McLaughlin & Talbert 2006: 9).

Yet, the questions of *what* and *how* teachers learn when collaborating with colleagues remain unanswered: What kinds of knowledge and skills do teachers acquire in conjunction with their collaboration? What brings about teachers' learning when they collaborate in teams? And how does their learning affect their practice? In this paper I will examine to what extent action learning can contribute to answering these questions.

The material I draw on here stems from action learning processes in which I have participated in the role of an external consultant. It consists primarily of interviews with teachers involved in action learning processes as well as unstructured observations made during these processes. Although this material was not initially collected for research purposes, it brought about two points I would like to discuss. Firstly, the interviews contribute to describing in further detail what and how teachers say they learn from their collaboration in teams about developing classroom teaching practices but they also help to describe limitations connected with anchoring teachers' learning within teachers' collaboration in teams. Secondly, the interviews present several methodological dilemmas. An example is that the teachers in the interviews expressed that action learning, which I will describe in further detail later, and collaboration in teams, which working with action

learning entails, brought about effective learning processes for the teachers and constructive changes in their classroom teaching practices. However, in many cases it was not possible to register these changes by observing the interviewees' teaching practices. The dilemma is therefore how one can ascertain teacher learning. At the end of the paper, I examine in more detail some of the methodological dilemmas connected with studying teachers' learning.

I begin this paper by presenting the action learning process which formed the framework for the teacher team collaboration that provides the empirical fundament of this paper. Following a brief presentation of this data material, first the possibilities, then the limitations of teachers' collaboration in teams for teacher learning are discussed using examples from the data material. Finally, several methodological dilemmas are considered and the paper's conclusions are presented.

### **Action Learning**

The approach to action learning I present here is developed at the Centre for Leadership, Evaluation and Organisational Development (KLEO), with inspiration from action research (Lewin 1946) and research on teacher collaboration in professional communities of practice (McLaughlin & Talbert 2001, 2006; Little 2002 for instance). I have described this action learning approach in detail elsewhere (Plauborg et al 2007). For now, I will therefore provide a brief description.

The primary function of action learning is to bring about the development of teaching through the ongoing experimentation with, observation of and reflection on concrete educational settings. Action learning involves teachers' studying and experimenting with practice in order to refine their practice and make it more knowledge-based, thereby furthering teachers' learning. The basic approach is that a team of teachers explores the educational setting together and in this way acquires knowledge and experience of how the setting unfolds and how it can be developed. The central focus of action learning is therefore the creation of practice-based knowledge about, and the development of teaching. As such, action learning is one way of giving meaning to teacher collaboration and can be a step towards developing and professionalising what Lord calls critical collegueship (Lord 1994).

Analytically speaking, an action learning process can be divided into five phases which intermesh during the process. The first phase in an action learning process concerns the formulation of a definition of a problem area which can function as a starting point for studying and experimenting with practice. It therefore has to be a definition in relation to which it is possible to take action. The second phase of the process has to do with the initiation of actions. Actions are another term for experiments and can be acts initiated in order to investigate more closely the problem area in question, or experiments established with an aim toward discovering a more appropriate way of taking action with regard to the problem at hand. In the third phase, the focal point is the observation of the actions that have been implemented. That is to say, during this phase colleagues from the team systematically observe each other's teaching with the aim of spotting the result of the action. The fourth phase of an action learning process is a didactic conversation, which is a structured conversation within the team about the observations which both the observer and the observed have made. This conversation also includes discussions of the actions soon to be initiated. An action learning process is completed with an analysis of the experiences and the knowledge which the process has enabled to develop – if any. This analysis constitutes the fifth and final phase.

As previously stated, the five phases intermesh in the course of an action learning process. This is first and foremost because the implementation of actions, the observations of these actions and the didactic conversations all constitute an ongoing process. The observations and the reflections they bring about result in the initiation of new actions, either as a follow-up to the initial action or because observations have made it apparent that something else needs to be tried. The implementation of new actions leads to new observations which in turn lead to new didactic conversations. In addition, in the course of an action learning process, many teachers adjust and further pinpoint the problem area as their knowledge increases, and so this first phase is also subject to ongoing re-evaluation. In other words, action learning is a method that to a large extent matches the recommendations described by McLaughlin and Talbert in the introduction to this paper.

Within the action learning perspective presented here, a normative view of learning is applied. This means that action learning seeks to encourage teachers to reflect critically upon and develop their own and colleagues' practice. Therefore action learning is an attempt to professionalise teachers' understanding of teaching and professional expertise

which involves taking a critical stance in relation to the ways in which teaching is constituted, executed and evaluated. Action learning is also an attempt to establish a link between what is to be learnt and the context it is to be learnt in. In this sense, there is talk of a practice-based, situated concept of learning within action learning.

As the name action learning implies, another aspect of learning is that it is closely connected to action. However, action should be understood broadly and learning can therefore both consist of changes in teachers' discourse concerning their practice, both in form and content, as well as changed patterns of action. In this regard, the understanding of learning in action learning does not differ substantially from the view of learning represented in much research on teacher collaboration and professional communities of practice. The development of a critical collegueship (Lord 1994) seems to be an objective for everyone who works with the development of teaching practices within schools (Wilson & Berne 1999).

### **Data material**

This paper relies primarily on qualitative semi-structured interviews with seven teachers held after they finished their action learning projects. The aim in the interviews was to investigate whether action learning contributed to teachers' professional learning and to changes in classroom teaching practices. Therefore the phases in an action learning process described above formed the basis of the questions in the interviews and gave the interviewees opportunity to express which phases, if any, were conducive to their learning and what they learned. The questions likewise focused on whether the teachers could identify changes in their practice as a result of the process. A focus group interview was held with two teachers from one school, another with four teachers from another school and an individual interview was held with a teacher from a third school<sup>1</sup>.

The observations took place over a period of two years with a total of 24 visits split into four blocks of six weeks. The problem formulated by the teachers at the beginning of the action learning process and the various actions implemented in relation to the formulated problem comprised the overall framework for the observations. These observations were not originally conducted with a research objective and were unstructured in form.

### **Registration of teachers' learning: Findings**

On the basis of the interviews, the focal point for the following discussion is the possibilities and limitations for teacher learning within teachers' collaboration in teams within an action learning framework. Which aspects of teaching practice are made visible by focusing on a problem area, by the ways in which topics are broached in the didactic conversations, and by observation of colleagues' teaching? And which aspects of teaching practice is an action learning approach to teachers' collaboration within teams less suitable for dealing with? What are the limitations of anchoring teachers' learning within teachers' collaboration in teams?

#### *Possibilities for teacher learning within teachers' collaboration in teams – perspectives from action learning*

There are, of course, variations in the ways in which teachers express their learning in relation to action learning processes. But one point the teachers stressed was that focusing on certain parts of the flurry of activities in the classroom brings about learning.

I think it was a real eye-opener for me when we sat and talked about this thing with having a focus, with being concrete, and what you really want to achieve with it. Cutting out all the bullshit and beating about the bush. What is this really all about? What do you want to get out of it? I don't know if you could see a radical difference in practice if you, like, had a video camera now and compared to five years ago, but in my mind, I am clearer about what I want to do. And I also really think that the lessons are conducted differently.

In the quote, the teacher stresses the importance of focusing on a formulated problem, and he likewise indicates another key point, namely that those small refinements of practice that do not necessarily look significant from outside all the same have a great impact on and represent a fundamental change in the individual teacher's understanding of and view upon teaching practices. The teacher describes a new found clarity regarding his objectives with a particular lesson due to a more reflective relationship to practice.

In Denmark, as elsewhere, teachers' collaboration in teams tends to be focused on individual student problems, teaching materials and discipline rather than on classroom learning, teaching practice and curriculum goals (Hargreaves 2000; Little 1990). Therefore, when teachers collaborate on preparing their lessons they tend to talk about

what kind of activities the pupils should be involved in – not about what they hope to achieve in terms of pupil learning. However, the interviewees stress that by having a focus on a formulated problem and being able to receive critical feedback from their colleagues they gain a new perspective upon themselves as a facilitator of learning processes rather than ‘just’ initiators of activities.

In the interviews, the teachers say they learn by opening their classroom door and allowing colleagues to systematically observe their teaching. Research points out (Little 2003) that observations by colleagues help teachers to discover how much is going on in their classrooms they are unaware of. The teachers I interviewed supported this finding but they also stressed another point:

You can just sit and recognise a lot of situations. You can envision yourself standing up there. You get the chance to sit and look at it from sort of outside because you know how it can be, that situation with those kids and that assignment. So you see yourself reflected in the teaching situation you’re watching, one you yourself have played an active role in on countless occasions. Then you start to think about how you personally react and reflect on your own way of doing things.

This quote sums up part of the process that teachers say they go through when they observe one another’s teaching – a process which revolves around comparing the teaching they witness with their own teaching. The quotes also indicate that precisely this mirroring effect is an important source of learning. These mirroring effects take place when teachers observe each others’ teaching, but, according to the teachers, another mirroring effect also exists, namely the one that occurs with the teacher who is teaching while the observations take place:

When there is somebody sitting and watching, I become much more self-aware – then I realise that I can easily end up going off on some or other tangent, so it ends up like a double observation. I get kind of split in two when I’m in that situation, where I think I do what I’ve prepared, but, at the same time, I can, like, step outside and watch myself.

The fact that there is a colleague sitting in the classroom and observing the lesson is therefore in itself a cause to reflect on one's own experiences and notions, and thereby also on practice, from a position of distance. Precisely this reflexive distance to one's own actions can, according to the interviewees, contribute to detecting routines and habits, some appropriate and others less so. As such, this reflexive distance can, by bringing about an awareness of routines and habits, lead to a development of practice.

The didactic conversation is characterised by a relatively strict structure, where the focus is kept on the problem at hand and the actions which have been implemented. The interviewees expressed that their learning increases when their interactions about teaching are structured. Moreover, the teachers express that the didactic conversations also contribute to creating a greater solidarity within the team:

I walk out of there with kind of an 'I'm not alone' feeling. That is something you can often experience when you're a class teacher in a class by yourself. You can feel pretty alone. You're on your tod with your teaching too. It's nice when you feel some team spirit, that you have something in common, that you can achieve something together.

So, according to the teachers interviewed, talking about teaching encourages their team spirit, their professional expertise, and a shared sense of being competent at their jobs. In their review of research on teachers' learning Wilson and Berne (1999) conclude that teachers enjoy the chance to talk about their work. This is not surprising considering much of a teacher's working day is still spent isolated from their colleagues with little opportunity to gain insight into each others' classroom practice, insight which might enable critical and reflexive discussion:

I also think the matter of getting the time to sit down and talk about teaching on a slightly higher level. It's been fantastic to talk with colleagues who you actually share some kids with. We have some things we have to do together at this school, and to sit and share some ideas, and have some good chats about the stuff you don't get time to talk about ordinarily. I've left the meetings with renewed self-confidence towards my job and towards what I think I can do. I feel I've got a hold of something, got something back which sometimes gets lost in this everyday life

where it just rips along and you can hardly get a chance to finish one thing before you have to move on to the next thing.

Even though the teachers interviewed maintained that the didactic conversations created new horizons for learning, they had difficulties describing *what* they learned. It is obvious, the above quotations in mind, that the teachers enjoy the attention and recognition of their work and that one of the things the teachers feel they learn is that they gain something from collaborating. That is, that they can actually use each other for more than just practical purposes and delegation of tasks. This might sound mundane, but in light of the fact that teachers spend the majority of their time working alone, and, when they do collaborate in teams, they do so without having a clear picture of what the content of this collaboration could be, it would seem a significant step after all.

Little argues that professional development should be more closely tied to the actual contexts of teaching (Little 1993). In action learning, the practice-based expansion of knowledge is likewise central, and the teachers say that it is easier to put what they learn to use because it is continuously tied to practice:

It's very concrete. Even though you've had theory and didactics in college, this is more concrete, something you can use because reality just looks different than it does when you're sitting in college. It just does, even if it's a cliché, it's true. Things can't always just be translated to the real world. This is the closest to the real world I've tried. It can actually be used for something.

To sum up, in answering the question of *what* kinds of knowledge and skills teachers' acquire in conjunction with their collaboration within an action learning framework, it seems that they first and foremost learn that there is a potential for learning in collaborating with each other. Moreover, they learn a set of skills for making the most of such collaboration. As to the question of *how* teachers' are learning when they collaborate in teams, this material suggests that teachers learn from observing each other's teaching practices and by discussing their observations together. In addition, the material indicates that when teachers collaborate with the aim of developing their teaching practices, it is beneficial to establish a focus for this collaboration at an early stage. As such, action learning would seem to provide a useful method for structuring team collaboration.

*Limitations for teachers' learning within teachers' collaboration in teams – perspectives from action learning*

There are still some things where I have to remember that today you're going to learn about the declination of nouns. So that you make the goal for the lesson clear. What are we going to learn here and now in this hour and a half? I think that's important for children to know, and it's usually at the back of my mind. I don't always get around to writing it up on the blackboard, but I at least say it. Then I also remember the thing with the exercise book. What do they need to have in front of them, if they need something? But otherwise, then there's also the thing with conflicts. The kids are used to it now. That it has to wait.

This quotation does not say anything about how this teacher related to practice prior to the action learning process. If the statement is taken at face value, however, it can simultaneously express that this teacher is involved in a process where she is changing her understanding of what is important and what is not with regard to communication, *and* express that the action learning process has resulted in a reduction in the complexity that exists in practice. In the quote, one suspects there is an understanding of practice that, if the goal of a lesson is made explicit to pupils, if one, in the role of teacher, remembers to tell pupils which materials they need to use during the lesson, and if one makes sure not to 'waste' lesson time on conflicts, then it will result in good teaching. In other words, the teacher talks about her practice as a checklist and the statement can therefore also indicate an instrumental view of practice, where one's realisations are reduced to just being a case of remembering a number of tricks of the trade. Therefore, the teacher does not really adopt a reflexive view of practice, that being a skill to analyse her own practice and ask herself critical questions such as: what was it I wanted the pupils to achieve in this lesson? How did the situation unfold in relation to this intention? What was my role? What could I have done differently in order to achieve this purpose? Returning to the quotation, that is to say that the teacher has learned something from the action learning process, but that what she has learned is not in accordance with the objectives of action learning (cf. page 4 – 5).

The quote above is one of several examples that show that the teachers in the interviews were concerned with practical actions. They often focused on solving practical problems in their everyday classroom practice, and expanding their repertoire of actions rather than challenging and taking a critical and reflexive approach to one another's

practice. This was particularly apparent in the didactic conversations and, therefore, it would seem likely that the ideal of critical collegueship (Lord 1994) will not be achieved through teachers' team collaboration alone. That teachers feel a need to discuss everyday practical problems and possible solutions with their colleagues is both understandable and a valid and important aspect of their collaboration, but it can also be a barrier to gaining a deeper understanding and development of practice.

### **Methodological dilemmas when studying teachers' learning**

When questioning the teachers regarding what they felt they had learned from the different phases in an action learning process, it was striking that they, more or less without exception, answered another question entirely. The following quote is a typical example:

What I liked about action learning was that you work with a few quite small and concrete things. It doesn't have to be something completely impossible to cope with, which becomes too pretentious, and where you don't really know what you're supposed to be doing anyway. You actually enjoy teaching a little bit more because you see a difference just by changing a fairly small thing.

The teacher's response is concerned with what she *enjoyed* about working with action learning, and not necessarily with what she *learned*. My reason for highlighting this is that the interviewees tended to respond with what they thought of the endeavours, and thereby did not really provide information as to what knowledge teachers acquire in conjunction with team collaboration. Likewise, it is unclear whether that knowledge improves their practice, and, if it does so, how. The first methodological dilemma I would like to point out is therefore that saying one has enjoyed something does not necessarily mean one has learned something from it. When attempting to answer the question of *what* teachers learn from team collaboration, simply asking them would therefore not seem sufficient.

Another notable point in the interviews is that none of the teachers refer to what they had learned in relation to the problem formulated in the course of their work with action learning – that is, they refer to their learning in abstract terms. This is particularly surprising bearing in mind that the teachers often highlight the fact that action learning is directed towards concrete everyday challenges as one of the methods' most positive aspects. This brings us to the second methodological dilemma: taken at face value

the teachers seem to contradict themselves and this is another reason why one should be careful when drawing conclusions about teachers' learning solely on the basis of their own statements.

The third and final dilemma, I would like to draw attention to, is that it was not possible to register substantial differences in the teachers' classroom teaching practices during the two years I followed them. At least two questions can be asked in this regard: Firstly, is a lack of registered development in practice synonymous with a lack of learning? Or is it a case of an inadequate observation technique? The observations undertaken might not have been sensitive to possible changes in the teachers' classroom practice. Even though learning may result in changes, it is difficult to ensure that the observation technique used is sufficiently delicate to register such changes, and thereby also to establish that learning has taken place. Secondly, what timetable is appropriate for tracing changes in classroom practice? Learning processes may not lead to immediate changes and consideration must therefore be given to the duration of a study of teachers' learning in relation to classroom practice. At the same time, of course, it is difficult to attribute any changes to action learning with any degree of certainty, as teachers participate in a complex web of contexts which could be the source of learning. Such difficulties are increased the further from the participation in an action learning process one comes before registering changes.

## **Conclusions**

The focus in this paper has been to discuss what and how teachers learn in conjunction with team collaboration from an action learning perspective, as well as to identify limitations connected with anchoring teachers' professional development within a team framework. In addition, it has been the intention to discuss a number of methodological dilemmas which the interviews drew attention to when studied together with observations from practice. With regard to the latter, it has not been the ambition in this paper to try to solve these dilemmas. Because like many others, I do not feel able to answer questions such as who is to judge what teachers learn if we can not take their own expressions at face value. However, on the basis of this study, I believe it is fair to conclude that it is not sufficient merely to ask teachers directly when investigating teachers' learning, partly because they tend to answer another question, that is the question of what they enjoyed,

partly because they tend – at least in the interviews referred to here – to contradict themselves. Bearing these reservations in mind, the results from this paper would still seem to suggest that the following elements are conducive to teachers’ learning in conjunction with team collaboration: When a focus is established for the collaboration, for example in the form of a formulated problem area; when teachers are given the opportunity to observe one another’s practice; and when teachers get the chance to discuss, evaluate, and reflect upon teaching with colleagues. As such, action learning comprises a useful method for organising teachers’ collaboration within teams in such a way as to promote teacher learning.

A vital limitation for teachers’ learning in conjunction with team collaboration seems to be teachers’ tendency to focus on practical actions and to use team collaboration as a way of extending their repertoire of actions. There are presumably many good and sensible reasons for this teacher logic, but never the less, these interviews indicate that it is a barrier to gaining a more critical and distanced view of practice, which would enable the development of a genuinely investigative approach to practice, where the teachers also dare to challenge the basis assumptions practice is based upon.

Another dilemma this paper has considered involves the question of how we recognise learning and development. In the action learning processes this paper is based upon, it was not possible to register development but that does not necessarily indicate that the teachers have not learned anything. It could also be the case that the observations were not sensitive enough to identify such changes.

In the educational debate, teacher team collaboration appears at times a panacea for meeting the challenges faced by contemporary teachers and schools. In Denmark, many schools have introduced team collaboration without any real discussion regarding form and content, apparently in the belief that if teachers are organised in teams, it will result in development. In this paper I have argued that further research is necessary concerning *what* and *how* teachers learn within teachers’ collaboration in teams. This research could add substance to the educational debate and likewise contribute a far too rare critical voice to research within the field.

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<sup>i</sup> All quotations have been translated from Danish into English