Bridge over troubled water: Rebuilding professional learning in landscapes of professional complexity

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Thank you for inviting me to join you at this conference. Some of you may have attended a workshop last year led by my friends and colleagues Jo Flanagan and Bibiana Wigley. They are speech and language therapists working in primary and nursery schools in Derby, developing a video-based coaching approach to support teachers in creating more communication-rich pedagogies. This keynote uses their work with teachers as a case study which will illustrate the themes of inter- professional learning in complex landscapes that I will develop.

Inter-professional learning
in complex practice
landscapes

It is one case study, amongst many potential others. As a case study it is offers what Gary Thomas would call 'exemplary knowledge'. He refers to case studies as the sources of 'exemplary knowledge' not because the cases are to be taken as representative or models, but because they can be '*viewed* and *heard* in the

context of another horizon as defined by our different experiences, and used in the context of one's own experience. He asserts that such case studies are 'interpretable only in the context of one's own phronesis'. I hope that you will view this case study of professional learning and practice development from your own experiences and reflect on it with the benefits of your own phronesis, or wisdom in practice. I have tried to do just that in this keynote. I have taken what I understand about the nature and impacts of Jo and Bib's work, and applied my own conceptual lens to it. It has taken me on a journey which I would like to share with you now. I will use my powerpoint as a series of postcards from this journey to explore the key ideas that have emerged.

So, lets locate this case study of interprofessional learning in the educational landscape.

The universal service that almost all children experience is school; starting with early years' education. There, they and their families start to rely heavily on teachers and teaching assistants to support their development and learning.

The National Curriculum assumes children start school with necessary speech, language and communication skills, ready to learn and to develop quickly using reading and writing as the vehicle for demonstrating measurable competence.

However, in a 2017 study Law et al provide evidence that 5–8% of all children in England and Wales are likely to have language difficulties; and there is a strong social gradient, with children from socially disadvantaged families being more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with a language problem. Disparities in child language capabilities are recognisable in the second year of life and clearly have an impact by the time children enter school, where their language skills play a key role in their progress, attainment and socialisation and consequently their life chances. Language skills are widely accepted as the foundation skills for learning and it is recognised that most children with SLCN have some difficulty learning to read and write.

This raises the problem of appropriate provision. Ainscow et al, for example, found in a Manchester-based study, published in 2012 that teachers were missing around half of children's SLCN. To compound this problem, in 2017 Gascoigne and Gross reported that teachers who worked in areas of high disadvantage were often 'norm-shifting', meaning that they considered children who were at age related expectations to be above average. These dimensions create genuine challenges as SEND reforms call for schools to develop a robust offer to children at universal, targeted and specialist levels. Most teachers would need considerable training to identify speech, language and communication needs accurately and early on in a child's educational life, but this training is rarely offered to them. Most children only meet a speech

and language therapist if their needs are acute, of if their concerned parents are able to persuade the gatekeepers to provide the access. If a child does have access to speech and language therapy, a secondary problem emerges. The child is now between two professional domains. Speech and language therapists and teachers address children's speech, language and communication needs in different ways and each profession has its own cultures, learning experiences and methods for evaluating and researching new ways of working.

This short description just scratches the surface of the complexity of the professional landscapes that teachers work in; looking at just one feature of child development, the potential of related special needs or delay and the challenge of the current curriculum and assessment regimes. But even though it is just one part of the jigsaw we have to start somewhere to change outcomes for children and young people, especially those who are most vulnerable. Jo and Bib did just that. They started with what they knew and could change.
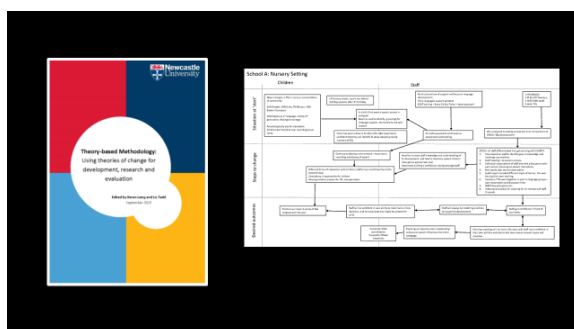
Before I continue I should be clear on my positionality. I have worked with Jo and Bib, firstly as a critical friend and consultant to help them develop the coaching dimensions of their new business as Clarity (independent speech and language therapists). After just a couple of meetings our working relationship

evolved into more recognisable collaborative action research. The research was undertaken across both primary and early years' settings in Derby where high concentrations of children with speech, language and communication needs attend schools in socially deprived wards, and many of these schools also serve populations of children whose first language is not English.

We used a Theory of Change Methodology as an evaluative tool, basing our work on the approaches developed with my former colleagues, Karen Laing and Liz Todd at Newcastle University, Research Centre for Learning and Teaching. Our working hypothesis was that specialist training and coaching could mobilise the knowledge and skill sets of both the teachers and speech and language therapists to better enable the teachers to critically reflect on their practice.

This was a three step process. Jo and Bib first audited the school environment and sampled some lessons. They then led short group training sessions for teachers and teaching assistants in the settings. The training covered theoretical models from education and speech and language therapy research; including ages and stages of speech and language development appropriate to the age range of children that the teachers worked with. Practical speech,

language and communication based classroom approaches were highlighted and the teachers were also introduced to basic coaching theory.

This then led on to the specialist coaching stage. Jo and Bib took short video clips of dialogue-based teaching in the teachers' own classrooms. As soon after the lesson as possible the teacher watched the clip, followed by the speech and language therapists. Each made notes, for example reflecting on their perceptions of the child or children's age and stage of development, the pre-planned language learning opportunities created and the oracy and language learning interactions deployed to support the children's vocabulary development. In addition, aspects such as children's turn taking and social communication skills, attention and listening skills, understanding of language, use of grammar and sentence structure and narrative skills were noted. Interesting extracts from the video were chosen both by the teacher and by Jo and Bib, and these were then used to then frame the coaching conversation. In total, each teacher (and some teaching assistants) engaged in a series of three video-based coaching sessions with a speech and language therapist, creating cycles of critical thinking and reflection on live practice, enacted in a non-judgemental creative learning space.

A new model of collaborative action research; theorising from inter-professional practice development

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ABSTRACT
The development of pedagogies to meet the needs of diverse communities can be supported through inter-professional practice development. This article explores one such experience, that of speech and language therapists developing a new video-based coaching approach for teachers and teaching assistants in multi-cultural settings with high numbers of children learning English as an additional language. To support them in developing and trialling the coaching approach, the expertise of a teacher-educator and educational researcher was provided through a university business

In working in partnership with teachers in this way Jo and Bib confirmed their basic premise; that the teachers' knowledge for effective pedagogies might be enhanced by drawing on the specific expertise that they held because of their own professional expertise as speech and language therapists. They found the training and coaching to be a means to support teachers' professional learning which was suited to the complex and particular contexts in which they worked. Through our action research and using the Theory of Change approach we were able to demonstrate that this form of coaching can bring speech and language therapy research and expertise into the practice domain of teachers. I will share some details of how this changed practice and allowed participants to develop new understandings in a short while. For now, I want to emphasise that this was a dynamic, reciprocal and co-constructive relationship through which both parties, from the two professions, extended their knowledge base and developed a more nuanced understanding of relevant evidence for, and in, practice. I offer this case study, not as an excuse to focus on my enthusiasm for coaching, but as a way to explore inter-professional learning.

One of the research outputs derived from this study was a new model of collaborative action research, which drew on the reality that this work was only ever part of our working lives. The model was developed through reflection on the collaboration between myself as a teacher educator and researcher, and Jo and Bib as the speech and language therapists. However, the same model has resonance for the processes of inter-professional learning as illustrated by this case study. This model offers a way of conceptualising interprofessional learning through time, and of recognising the importance of the partners' zones of proximal, contributory and collaborative activities in sustaining change and knowledge-creation.
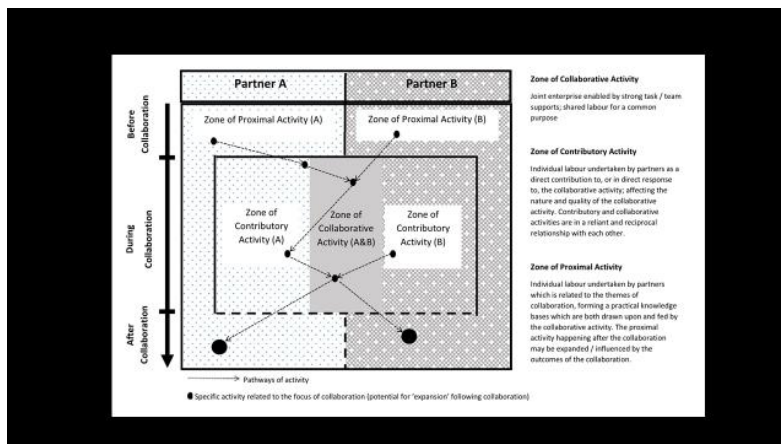
Let me explain. Using this model let's take Partner A to be the teacher, working in their primary or early years setting. Partner B is thus the speech and language therapist. The teacher has a huge and multi-facted role and has to pay due regard to the norms and routines of the setting, the needs of all the children, the expectations for their learning in relation to the curriculum, and the felt responsibility for their progress and attainment. The teacher also mediates the relationship between the family and the school, and is expected to recognise which children may benefit from targeted pedagogic or clinical therapeutic interventions. They do all this for each child while only knowing that child as one of probably thirty children they have responsibility for. The speech and language therapist may provide one of those interventions, if a teacher has identified a need, and if provision can be funded. They usually arrive at the school just before their scheduled session with a designated child, which is perhaps one of up to ten similar sessions that day. The speech and language therapists rarely has opportunities to talk to the teachers, has time to pass on only scant records, but will return for more sessions with that child. Following each session the child returns to the classroom, absorbed once more into the melee of learning, and the teacher hopes that the speech and

language intervention will start to rub off on the child's capacity to access the curriculum and make progress.

In quite simple terms we have a problem. We cannot expect the speech and language therapists to use their half hour session to re-introduce a week's learning to the child in a way that overcomes the impact of their speech, language and communication needs. Neither can we simply transfuse the expert knowledge that the speech and language therapist has of that child into the working knowledge of the teacher, as the two pass each other in the corridor.

So, what if we change the ways that partner A (the teacher) and partner B (the speech and language therapist) interact? What is acknowledged is that in their normal, but separate, working lives the speech and language therapist and the teachers are undertaking individual activities, both with the aims of improving the child's learning experiences and outcomes. Instead of seeing these as separate activities, what if we see these as proximal activities? In other words, these are nearby activities which can form two essential practical knowledge bases. We then need to find a way to bring these proximal activities into the same space and time. We need to create a collaborative activity. In our case study it is the video-based coaching which occurs in the zone of collaborative activity. Here, over time, the participants experienced strong task and team support, through their shared focus and labour around their joint enterprise of developing more communication rich pedagogies to better suit the needs of all children. So far, so good. But it is possible to recognise a third zone, that of contributory activity. This is the individual labour undertaken by each partner

as a contribution to, or as a direct response to the collaborative activity of coaching. This contributory activity might include the teacher requesting to attend a training course now that she is more aware of an area of practice that she wishes to develop. Perhaps the contributory activity occurs when the group of teachers being coached in a setting designate specific planning time to consider how to adjust a scheme of work based on their growing confidence in supporting speech, language and communication development. Maybe, a coached teacher may read a news article about the effect of social disadvantage on school attainment with a more informed understanding.

But it is not just the teachers who undertake activities that might be considered contributory activity. Perhaps the speech and language therapist now accesses policy guidance on curriculum and assessment because the coaching conversation with the teacher gave them insights they had not previously had, and that they feel they need to make more sense of. Perhaps during a meeting with a parent the speech and language therapist feels more able to understand the significance and possible causes of the parent's concerns about their child's school anxieties.

These contributory and collaborative activities are thus in a reliant and reciprocal relationship with each other, and indeed form a permeable working boundary with the proximal activities.   They also develop through time, with an inevitable before, during and after phase. Financial and time constraints mean that the capacity for ongoing collaborative activity (like coaching) is likely to be limited, but if the collaboration has created a genuine opportunity for

new professional learning to impact on practice, future practices are different to those which came before.

Here, I want to propose that it is possible for inter-professional learning to be transformative. In her 2014 Professional Development in Education paper Aileen Kennedy described coaching CPD models as 'malleable' rather than 'transformative'. However, our collaborative action research and analysis of the impacts of the coaching suggests that this model of inter-professional coaching has transformative qualities. This potential is realised if the coaching is co-constructive and collaborative level (as defined by a previous CFLAT research study). As such it can act to alter the conditions for teachers' learning, helping practitioners to position themselves in a culture of democratic professionalism rather than what Sachs refers to as managerial professionalism, and thus help to promote the teachers as agents of change.

This transformational potential is well illustrated in the following quote from a headteacher in a nursery setting in which Jo and Bib worked:

> "There has been a definite shift from individual specialist coaching to a staff coaching culture. The setting is open plan and I now notice teachers and teaching assistants commenting to each other while they are working with the children, referring to commonly understood concepts which support speech, language and communication. Because staff are more informed, their conversations with parents about this are also more meaningful."
>
> Headteacher

In addition to the impact on professional learning, practices and conditions already described, there was also evidence of impact of the more communication-rich pedagogies on teaching and on the children's outcomes. While it is not possible to demonstrate a direct, singular causal relationship between the inter-professional coaching practices and pupils' attainment data because the coaching cannot be isolated from other changes with the settings, one teacher described the initiative as part of 'the big push' through which they were focusing on children's speaking, guided reading, role-play and asking good questions in a more focused fashion.

These primary and nursery settings in disadvantaged and multi-lingual communities are typical of the complex 'black box' environments for which traditional education evaluations are poorly suited. This is why the Theory of Change interview methodology was used to try to establish the multiple mechanisms at work. One teaching assistant indicated this in her interview as follows:

> "The discussion with the speech and language therapist about my video clips was very reassuring. They found things I do well which I see as natural. They asked me questions about my practice, they focused my attention on things I had noticed and gave me advice. This worked because the video coaching came at the end of the audit and training process, so I had got to know them and felt comfortable with them. I trusted them and accepted their feedback. I feel more confident and reflective."
>
> Teaching assistant

Each head teacher and coaching participant interviewed was able to highlight noticeable changes in both pedagogy and in children's outcomes. In the nursery, a teacher was conscious that she was making more rapid and reliable assessments of children's language skills and that this led to more productive conversations between herself and colleagues about how to meet their initial learning and support needs. In the primary school, the children in Year Three, whose teachers had been coached, were commended by visitors to an assembly for their ability and willingness to articulate good questions in standard English (outstripping Year Four in this respect). In the same school, another teacher reflected that:
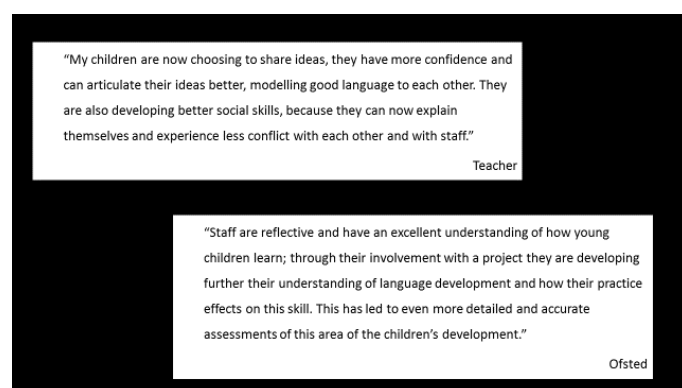
> "My children are now choosing to share ideas, they have more confidence and can articulate their ideas better, modelling good language to each other. They are also developing better social skills, because they can now explain themselves and experience less conflict with each other and with staff."

Perhaps the most passionate advocate of the impacts of the work was the long-established nursery head teacher who was working in her final year prior to retirement. She had indicated in the initial Theory of Change interview that

she was hoping that all her children (most of whom were learning English as an additional language) would demonstrate two points of progression in speaking and listening in the year, which had not been achieved before in the setting. During the return interviews she stated that every child (including those with special Educational needs) had achieved this, and that beyond this the attainment data in every area of the curriculum were 'amazing'. This progress was highlighted in an Ofsted inspection that year, which upgraded the nursery school from Good to Outstanding, with grade 1 for all areas (including pupil achievement and quality of teaching), and which stated that:

> "Staff are reflective and have an excellent understanding of how young children learn; through their involvement with a project they are developing further their understanding of language development and how their practice effects on this skill. This has led to even more detailed and accurate assessments of this area of the children's development."

To further develop this keynote I am going to draw on themes developed through an entirely different research article, written with colleagues in the Research Centre for Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University.

While this article relates specifically to interdisciplinary research it does so in a way which, in my opinion, has resonance with inter-professional learning, and in fact it uses this case study of collaborative action research as an example. As I re-read this article recently I was doing so through my personal lens that makes strong connections between professional learning as being possible through enquiry processes and research as a form of disciplined enquiry. While they may be undertaken for different purposes interdisciplinary research and inter-professional learning are likely to share some characteristics. So, brace yourselves, this is going to get a little more conceptually complicated.

Earlier I referred to the permeable boundary between the different activity zones in inter-professional learning. Now I want to think in more detail about how boundary crossing may make transformation more likely. I am going to refer to boundaries as learning assets rather than barriers, and I am going to propose that interprofessional learning may create and occur during valuable boundary experiences in landscapes of professional practice. To explore this further I will be drawing on the work of Akkerman and Bakker, Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Traynor and of Edwards, although I will singularly fail to attribute each precise point to the particular sources. I will also refer to the theorisation of boundary experiences further developed by myself and CFLAT colleagues which led to this article. In this part of the keynote I will offer fewer direct references to our case study, and I will use the collective first person more often. This is a call to arms for us as professional educators as much as is it to the professionals who we teach and work alongside.

Knowledge production and academic endeavour is conceptualized in terms of discipline, and the institutions in which these notions are entrenched are organized accordingly. Accompanying this are dichotomous notions of ontology and epistemology, which require researchers to position themselves in terms of perspective and methodological approach. Nevertheless, social problems or so-called 'wicked problems' such as educational inequality (Rittel and Webber 1973) cannot be tackled without understandings that extend beyond perspective and discipline (Goddard and Tewdyr-Jones 2016) and it is increasingly recognized that most complex social issues and challenges require interdisciplinary or inter-professional approaches (Edwards 2005). As such, ways need to be found to enable multiple interpretations to be encountered and understood.

One way to understand our complex professional contexts is to see that education might positioned as an attempt to deal with what can be referred to as 'wicked' problems in society, such as inequality. Speech, language and communication development and its impact on learning is one small element of this wicked problem. It seems sensible to agree that wicked problems cannot be tackled without understandings that extend beyond one profession or expert knowledge base. From a practitioner point of view, it is thus reasonable to accept that it is useful to encounter and start to understand multiple interpretations of the problem in context. Our case study seems to back this up.

If we are aiming for transformational professional learning and practice development, we need to start by confronting the problems we recognise in

this wicked landscape. Take a different example; how about a teacher educator from a university setting working alongside a trainee teacher's mentor. Do their practices exist in separate bubbles as far as the trainee teacher is concerned, or do they make use of the boundary between school and university based experiences as a learning asset (for all parties?). One way to consider this boundary in the practice landscape is as a point of confrontation through which our individual domains of expertise need to be reconsidered in relation to each other, in order to truly recognise the shared problem space.

Transformation would involve significant changes in practice, potentially creating new in-between practices, which are sometimes referred to as boundary practices. This may lead to hybridization; a creative process in which a distinctly new form of practice emerges (a hybrid), and which may crystalize to help us to develop new routines and procedures. For this to occur in complex professional settings collaboration and dialogue are essential, and mediating tools or artefacts may help. This is because (as illustrated in our case study) shared experiences in practice contexts help to surface the complex system of the communities of practice and the boundaries between them, and these can become the focus for professional development.

Ok – let's step it up another level. According to the two Wenger-Traynors landscapes of practice have three key qualities.

Practice landscapes are political, flat and diverse

They argue that landscapes of practice are political, in that there is the potential for power dynamics, which might create noise through competing voices and claims to knowledge. Think here about the potential power dynamic between a junior social worker and an experienced headteacher working together in safeguarding proceedings around a child at risk of both school exclusion and removal from their family home into the care system.

They also suggest that landscapes of practice are flat, and while this seems counter-intuitive, this is because they argue that the ultimate production of practice is undertaken by practitioners who make significant use of local knowledge (ignoring the hierarchies in the way we tend to organise knowledge). Think here about a home-school support worker who has a key role in supporting the child and family mentioned above to navigate school in their new situation.

They also believe that landscapes of practice are diverse, and that this diversity creates unavoidable boundaries of practice across the landscape. Think again about this child. Their practice landscape does not start or end at the school gate; it extends through to their

experiences of social and family contexts, as well as multi-agency interventions in their life.

In education our complex landscapes of professional practice encompass several bodies of knowledge associated with the multiple connected communities of practice; and these form the potential for a social body of knowledge held in the working relationships of professionals, who journey through this landscape. On this journey we have the potential for boundary experiences if we gain experience of the different sites of practice, and we can learn from these most effectively if these experiences become shared learning assets.

In education our complex landscapes of professional practice encompass several bodies of knowledge associated with the multiple connected communities of practice; and these form the potential for a social body of knowledge held in the working relationships of professionals, who journey through this landscape. On this journey we have the potential for boundary experiences if we gain experience of the different sites of practice, and we can learn from these most effectively if these experiences become shared learning assets. Through the research which forms the evidence base of our CFLAT article, we suggested that boundary experiences seem to stimulate transformation where there is genuine reciprocity between partners. The case study of speech and language therapists working in a coaching relationship supports this conclusion, because despite (or perhaps due to) the two distinct bodies of knowledge the coaching was not instructional. Instead it was co-constructive, and sensitive to the context and the specific roles, practices and knowledges of each participant.

This brings me to my final significant concept, which is that of knowledgeability. Professionals from different fields will first experience and interpret the landscapes of practice that they encounter using their own distinct disciplinary and professional knowledge. As they journey through the

landscape they collect memories and artefacts, and their identities start to be shaped by their experiences over time. If professionals from different fields have shared boundary experiences they develop a recognition of the relevance of their individual competences and knowledge to the complex professional landscape, and can start to co-construct a relevant social body of knowledge. Thus a growing knowledgeability means that each shared boundary experience can become a meaningful moment of service. These moments of service go on to support the development of productive working relationships. Professionals become more trusting of each other, their work is made up of constructive connections and they develop a mutual understanding and respect. This means that beyond their formal silo-ed roles they can become more vivid and valued individuals to each other, and their credibility is enhanced.

inter-professional learning can
build bridges across our complex landscapes of practice

Instead of being compliant to, or reinforcing common educational cultures underpinned by a degree of suspicion, surveillance or blame, shared boundary experiences allow professionals to work in ways that are authentic given the realities of their contexts. They can also engage in more inclusive working practices based on participation and dialogue and enter spaces in which co-construction is possible. Without collaboration professionals will always work proximally. We need to re-think approaches to professional development

through collaborative and contributory activities which create and sustain opportunities for interprofessional learning.   We need to deliberately build bridges across our complex landscapes of practice. Without these bridges our most vulnerable members of society will remain isolated and in disadvantaged situations, and our institutions will stagnate. Without these bridges each professional life will be a series of missed opportunities to effect the changes our society demands. Transformation may be a far-away destination, but collectively we can journey towards it.

Thank you for your attention. I hope that this has given food for thought, and I look forward to sharing the opportunities for discussion enabled by this conference format.