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Narratives of collaboration in practice; discourses, dimensions and diversity in collaborative professional development

Professor Rachel Lofthouse
CollectivED

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New PGCert Coaching and Mentoring for Education Practitioners
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- Think Piece Working Papers
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Over 120 papers, from 14 countries

Authors include students, teachers, school leaders, coaches, mentors, consultants, research students, teacher educators, academics

This conference paper is published in Issue 8, p.116.
Narratives of collaboration in practice; discourses, dimensions and diversity in collaborative professional development

Analysis of Practice Insight Papers
What can we learn from practitioners’ narratives of collaborative professional development, and are key lessons to be found amongst its complexities?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paper title</th>
<th>Author(s) &amp; positionality</th>
<th>Focus of practice</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Summary used in this paper</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Researching our practice using The Discipline of Noticing</td>
<td>Daniel Brown; Internal facilitator &amp; middle leader</td>
<td>Collaborative CPD</td>
<td>FE</td>
<td>Discipline of Noticing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| From teachers being accountable to taking collective responsibility' using Lesson Study for cultural change | Colin Lofthouse; Headteacher  
Claire King; External facilitator | Collaborative CPD         | Primary | Lesson Study              |
| Breathing Space; enabling professional learning through alternative staff meetings | Rebecca Jackson; Headteacher                             | Collaborative CPD         | Primary | Alternative staff meetings|
| Developing a learning culture in schools                                    | George Gilchrist; Headteacher & Internal facilitator      | Collaborative CPD         | Primary | Learning Culture          |
| Working together: Coaching as the compass in the journey of implementation | Kelly Ashley and North Star TSA; External facilitator with Teaching School | SSIF project Coaching     | 10 primary schools | SSIF Project Coaching     |
| Thinking Environments                                                       | Lou Mycroft; External facilitator                        | Collaborative CPD         | FE      | Thinking Environment      |
| Being mentored through CTeach                                               | Stephen Campbell; Teacher / mentee                        | Career development mentoring; (Chartered Teacher) | Secondary | CT mentoring              |
| Three questions for school leaders.                                         | Max Bullough, Leah Crawford, Carolyn Hughan; External facilitators | Leadership support       | Primary and secondary schools | Leadership through Narrative |
| Lesson chats @Mayfield                                                      | Paula Ayliffe; Deputy headteacher & then Headteacher      | Collaborative CPD         | Primary | Lesson Chats              |
Thematic summaries; validated by authors

Data synthesis and analysis for the 2019 conference paper

I hope that the formalized deconstruction of teaching strategies and diversity in collaborative technologies emerging

Data 1: Examples of successful strategies in diverse environments

Data 2: Analyzing the effectiveness of collaborative technologies

Data 3: Comparing the outcomes of diverse student groups

Table 1: Characteristics of successful strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Engagement</td>
<td>Active participation, feedback, and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Integration</td>
<td>Use of digital tools to facilitate collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Dynamics</td>
<td>Balanced participation, active listening, and participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Appropriate for the subject matter, setting, and student needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Diagram of the research process

1. Data Collection
2. Data Analysis
3. Results Interpretation

Conclusion

Through this study, we have identified several successful strategies in diverse environments. The use of technology, active participation, and group dynamics are crucial for effective collaboration. Further research is needed to explore the long-term impact of these strategies on student outcomes.
Developing sub-themes

7. Tenets

Strategic planning
- Develop an action plan focusing on the key areas identified in the strategic plan.
- Monitor progress and measure outcomes.
- Adjust strategies as needed.

Resource management
- Prioritize resources based on the strategic plan.
- Ensure effective allocation of resources.
- Evaluate resource use and make adjustments as necessary.

Project management
- Define clear project timelines.
- Monitor project progress and milestones.
- Address any issues or delays.

Innovation
- Foster a culture of innovation and continuous improvement.
- Encourage creativity and new ideas.
- Implement innovative solutions.

Communication
- Establish clear communication channels.
- Ensure timely and accurate information sharing.
- Address feedback and concerns.

Leadership
- Set clear goals and objectives.
- Lead by example and inspire others.
- Support and empower team members.

Financial management
- Maintain sound financial practices.
- Ensure fiscal responsibility.
- Manage budgets effectively.

Risk management
- Identify potential risks.
- Develop risk mitigation strategies.
- Monitor risks and adjust plans as needed.

Environmental sustainability
- Promote sustainable practices and initiatives.
- Reduce environmental impact.
- Foster awareness and engagement.

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Environmental sustainability
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8. Cultural change

- Foster a culture of continuous improvement.
- Encourage open communication and feedback.
- Celebrate achievements and milestones.
- Address challenges and setbacks.

9. Developing sub-themes and sub-themes

Developing sub-themes
- Identify key themes and sub-themes.
- Align sub-themes with strategic objectives.
- Create opportunities for collaboration.

Sub-themes
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Ecosystemic approach to analysing the narratives of collaborative practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INPUTS</th>
<th>ENGAGEMENT</th>
<th>OUTCOMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context &amp; participants (including author)</td>
<td>Theoretical / research influence</td>
<td>Collaborative practice design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of the dialogue in the practice</td>
<td>Emotional experiences of the practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal development and learning resulting from practice</td>
<td>Changes to professional practice</td>
<td>Cultural or collective changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In four cases (all primary schools) all members of teaching staff are involved with the collaborative practice and the school leaders are involved as facilitators, coaches or participants.

In one case the collaborative practice involves a teacher and an external coach / mentor as part of a new professional initiative set up by the Chartered College of Teaching and allowing both participants to engage in wider professional networks.

In the other four cases participation depended on an individual’s professional role in their setting, for example Advanced Practitioners across FE colleges, members of a subject department in single FE college, Specialist Leaders in Education and subject leaders in project schools, or membership of leadership teams.

There is evidence of how the scope, scale and design of the collaborative practices has been determined by the nature of expected participation.
• All based on broad theories of teacher learning, such as the value of reflection, but in some cases the facilitators draw on and cite specific practices with established design principles, including Lesson Study (Dudley, 2015), Thinking Environments (Kline, 2009), Discipline of Noticing (Mason, 2002).

• Others are informed by range of influences, including coaching (Lofthouse et al. 2010), practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and appreciative enquiry (Reed, 2007) from which the collaborative practices have been designed.

• The designs of the approaches and principles are deliberate not only because of the anticipated opportunities that will arise but also as a means to moderate some of the likely tensions and difficulties.
### Nature of dialogue sub-themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Examples from working papers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1. The content / focus of the discussion: e.g. related to aspects of teaching and learning, or drawing on research</td>
<td>“I came away from the initial chat needing to research a few things and then I fed them back to the teacher and we ended up team teaching the lesson.” (Lesson chats, quote from subject leader)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2. The collaborative nature of the dialogue: e.g. developing conversation skills (such as listening, asking good questions, not interrupting), sharing experiences, building shared language, sense of ownerships, mutually beneficial</td>
<td>‘We found that it was important that people could speak at length without fear of being interrupted, judged, or receiving unsolicited advice. It transformed the way we listened to, and supported, each other as a department.’ (Discipline of Noticing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3. The challenging aspect of the dialogue: probing, developing critical thinking, making links, enabling others to problem solve and making decisions, and this being sequenced over time.</td>
<td>‘identified possible changes to pedagogy and strategies used, in order to address these issues and participants were able to see how we were connecting all the ‘things’ we had to do, through a focus on learning and our learners’ (Learning Culture)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Emotional engagement sub-themes

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>B1. Feeling willing to engage with the process; not experiencing it as a threat and not being afraid to challenge each other. This leads to participants feeling less defensive, admitting when help needed, and reframing perceived issues as positives and possibilities.</strong></td>
<td>‘Staff were no longer afraid to challenge each other and were less defensive about their own practice and able to ask questions to clarify their understanding.’ (Lesson Study)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B2. Building positive relationships; feeling respected, experiencing kindness and support and gaining a heightened awareness of own and others’ values</strong></td>
<td>‘When members of a school community are asked to share their stories, it heightens their awareness of their histories, their values and their investment in their schools.’ (Leadership through Narrative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, my coach is kind and has been kind to me. [...] feeling relaxed comes as a consequence’ (CTeach Mentoring)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B3. Experiencing positive morale; enthusiasm and willingness to participate in the collaborative practice</strong></td>
<td>‘participants had retained a sense of intrigue: &quot;I can't remember what we did, but I felt myself relax as soon as I walked back into this room.&quot; (author and participant quote, Thinking Environment)</td>
</tr>
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</table>
### Personal development and learning sub-themes

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</table>
| **C1. Impacts on self-efficacy; changing how sees oneself, recognising impact of your work and gaining confidence. This leads to participants being keen to make changes and experiment in their work.** | ‘become more sensitive to habitual behaviours that may be more or less helpful, towards recognising and then making available other possibilities for acting.’ (Discipline of Noticing)  
‘Adaptive expertise increased as teachers recognised the impact they were having on learning, and how their learners were reacting to various learning situations. [...] They better understood the importance of relationships.’ (Learning Culture) |
| **C2. Discussions promote new insights to support work. They are thought-provoking, change how participants see things and allow them to gain expertise. Through their ability to reflect they develop clarity and coherence in thinking.** | "Thinking environments revolutionised my perceptions of education." (participant quote, Thinking Environment)  
‘Confidence to work through challenges - co-constructing next steps and empowering others. [...] Learning to adapt without compromising long-term goals Greater awareness and understanding of the role.’ (SSIF Project Coaching) |
### Impact on professional practice sub-themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>D1. Increased agency: a willingness to take action and responsibility. Sometimes this is linked potential future roles.</strong></td>
<td>“I have become more aware of the continuum between telling, and encouraging students to form their own opinions and explanations during this project, and have since experimented with moving around it as consciously as possible.” (participant quote, Discipline of Noticing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D2. Increased relational agency: participants are now more proactive, e.g. seeking more support, or being more collaborative in wider professional life.</strong></td>
<td>‘By giving teachers greater ownership of the improvement effort the senior leadership team are now seeing teachers display a much stronger commitment to learn from, with and on behalf of each other and their pupils.’ (Lesson Study)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D3. An impact on teaching and learning through more nuanced understanding and adopting methods of approaching key tasks</strong></td>
<td>‘The children enjoyed the time to explore new books, found themselves immersed in the stories, and used it as an opportunity to get dressed up and role play. During a school governor observation visit it was recognised that the children were talking about more about books, using wider vocabulary, and showing real enthusiasm for stories and reading.’ (Alternative staff meetings)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Impact on collective culture sub-themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples from working papers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E1. Ongoing collaboration and critical engagement; based on trust, respect and deeper relationships between staff. This results in more shared thinking collaboration over time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'But the energy it created was infectious, to the point that the whole workplace are setting up their own communities for everything from observation support meetings, to lesson planning and even a mud run community of practice.' (participant quote, Thinking Environment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘When reviewing appraisal requests at the end of 2017-18, ‘lesson chats’ were requested by 82% of the teaching staff, not because they were identified as needing further support, but because they wanted it’. (Lesson Chats)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E2. Links to school / college improvement. Teachers are generating more ideas, there is a change in hierarchy and an emergence of distributed leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Teacher-leadership and dispersed/distributed leadership began to develop, as previous hierarchies were ‘flattened’ and everyone recognised each person had a role in how the schools developed.’ (Learning Culture)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘They are constantly refreshing their thinking and practice and their decisions are rooted in the realities of our school, the learning opportunities and challenges they wanted to offer our pupils and their families and the ambitions they had for our school’s future.’ (Alternative staff meetings)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion; resistance and trust

Schools and professionals working in them are often resistant to change. Some of the collaborative practices discussed in the working papers were developed to break down some of the norms of practice and existing hierarchies.

Simple practical solutions were sought to this in the alternative staff meetings example tendencies for staff to be preoccupied with other school-based tasks rather than fully attending the meetings were reduced by holding them off site. (Jackson, 2017).

Some practices had eroded trust, e.g. ‘When [teachers] have been exposed to those types of cultures, their ability to think and act like individual professional practitioners, is taken away from them [...] They lose the ability to think creatively, to take risks and to be professionally curious.’ (Gilchrist, 2017, p.34)

Trust can be re-established or can enhanced through the experience of collaboration. e.g. ‘Thinking environments can be sabotaged but they can’t be subverted: the sabotage is at least out in the open. Being upfront about this has been helpful for educators who are struggling with implementing radical, equalising new practices into organisations built on hierarchies of power.’ (Mycroft, 2019, p. 107)
Collaborative practices are difficult to establish & sustain. They take time to put into operation, they require sustained effort, resourcing. Leaders need to make strategic & operational decisions to support them.

‘We have invested in these days because we know that ‘lesson chats’ are a very effective way of putting CPD into practice.’ (Ayliffe, 2019, p. 89).

‘Will an external ‘expert other’ be affordable? If we prioritise it we need to consider how the time and effort afforded to it can be used to ensure that there is a sustainable future and builds on the growing expertise of teachers to support future Lesson Study, in our school or beyond.’ (Lofthouse and King, 2017. p. 18)

Collaborative practices require different leadership. They cannot be micro-managed but do need sustained support. Participants must accept the challenge in terms of workload & need to engage emotionally & cognitively.

Whilst all six teachers it to be a good idea, only three managed to systematically record accounts over a period of time. Setting oneself to notice & systematically record events requires commitment.’ (Brown, 2017, p.13.)

Evidence indicates collaborative practices work well; e.g. when the participants take ownership. Workload will remain an issue, but it is possible to at least feel positive that the effort is enjoyable, productive and creates genuine learning opportunities.
Discussion; resolving tensions

• Resolving these tensions provides genuine opportunities for collaborative practices to make a difference to the working lives of teachers and leaders in schools and colleges, and at the time of writing there are many reasons why we might need to focus attention on this.

• Teacher wellbeing and teacher retention are becoming problems which the system needs to address through policy decisions and changes to practice. The narratives offer insights into factors that might positively impact on teachers’ capacity to sustain their work in the profession over time.

• Working collaboratively offers them opportunities to meet some of the challenges of the job head on, but in an environment where the challenges are shared and there is less anxiety is experienced, and to play a part in developing new approaches suited to the needs of their pupils, students and colleagues.
Collaborative practices can build teacher collective efficacy (Donohoo, 2017)

Dialogic & co-constructive practices (Lofthouse et al., 2010) ...


Developing ‘collective autonomy’ aspect of collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves and O’Connor, 2018)

At a time when some schools are now being characterized as toxic for employees (Woodley and Morrison, 2018), these narratives do offer hope that this is not inevitable (despite current pressures of accountability), and indeed demonstrate the value and impact of appropriately supported and intelligently designed workplace learning practices.

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