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Teacher Agency and Professional Learning Communities; what can Learning Rounds in Scotland teach us?

Abstract

Recently there has been growth in researching teacher agency. Some research has considered the relationship between teacher agency and professional learning. Similarly, there has been growing interest in professional learning communities as resources for professional learning. Connections have been made between professional learning communities and teacher agency, with professional learning communities seen as an affordance for the exercise of teacher agency. However, it has also been argued that there is little detailed evidence of what happens inside professional learning communities or of teacher agency in action. The research reported here focuses on a form of professional learning community from Scotland: Learning Rounds. It uses data from transcripts of post classroom observation conversations to consider the extent to which Learning Rounds provide an affordance for teacher agency and the extent to which that affordance is utilised. This research makes a contribution in three ways: adding to an empirical understanding of what happens in professional learning communities; understanding how teacher agency is (or is not) exercised in practice; considering what factors might affect the utilisation (or otherwise) of affordances for teacher agency. The paper concludes with several recommendations for developing effective professional learning communities as an affordance for teacher agency.

Key words: Teacher agency; professional learning communities; learning rounds; instructional rounds

Introduction

In recent years there has been a significant and rapid rise, internationally, in researching and theorising teacher agency. Much of this research has been in the context of exploring teachers' responses to, and room for manoeuvre within, mandated educational reforms or forms of externally imposed accountability (Lasky 2005; Vongalis-Macrow 2007; Ketelaar et al 2012; Robinson 2012; Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Soini 2014; Buchanan 2015; Stillman & Anderson 2015; Vähäsantanen 2015). Some of the research has considered the relationship between teacher agency and professional learning (Sannino 2010; Ketelaar et al 2014; Reeves & I'Anson 2014; Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Soini 2015; Toom, Pyhältö & Rust 2015) and some has been in the context of growing policy interest in mobilising teacher agency as a resource for school and system reform (e.g. Datnow 2012; Priestley et al 2012; Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Soini 2015). In each of these foci, reform and learning, both individual and collective, are seen as intertwined and as different facets of the same process.

In all of this literature sociocultural models of agency are adopted in which agency is theorised as an interaction between personal capacity and disposition and the affordances or resources for agency of the particular sociocultural context. Furthermore, this sociocultural theorisation of teacher agency tends to view personal capacity and disposition as arising from earlier biographical trajectories through differing sociocultural contexts and in relation to differing resources for agency rather than in terms of innate or idiosyncratic personal differences. These latter might be a reality and have an influence on agency but they are elusive to theorisation. It is also important not to underplay the role of sociocultural factors in individual development.

Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) conceptualisation of agency has been the single most frequently adopted in this work. For Emirbayer and Mische, agency involves the interplay of what they term a chordal triad of the iterational element, the projective element and the practical-evaluative element of agency. The iterational element is defined as "the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action" (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p. 971); the projective element is defined as "the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action" (ibid, p. 971) and the

practical-evaluative element is defined as “the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among possible trajectories of action, in response to ... presently evolving situations” (ibid, p. 971). Put in other terms these are: the way we have become habituated by past experience and resources to think and act in any given social context (iterational); whether we can envision possible future alternative ways of thinking and acting and what these are (projective) and the capacity, resources or affordances in the current situation (practical-evaluative) that mediate past understanding and actions into future understanding and actions. At the extreme ends of a range of possibilities we can either reproduce the iterational unchanged or we can think and act in new ways.

It is worth noting that each of these elements of agency could be personal or collective. That is we can consider the iterational, projective and practical-evaluative capacity of particular actors within a shared sociocultural context, which might differ depending on personal biographical trajectory; or we can consider the collective iterational, projective and practical-evaluative capacity of the sociocultural context and its members as a community. Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 971) note that the practical-evaluative element of agency “has been left strikingly undertheorized”. One question that could be asked in relation to this is ‘what is it in the present situation (practical-evaluative) that influences how much agency actors exercise?’

In trying to understand what features of the interacting personal and sociocultural aspects of agency influence the likelihood of agentic action, some researchers have focused on identifying personal attributes that seem conducive to agency (e.g. van der Heijden et al 2015) and some have focused on contextual factors (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen & Hökkä 2015; Bridwell-Mitchell 2015). However, both these approaches also recognise the symbiotic and reciprocal nature of the two aspects.

Although for the purpose of analysis it is a defensible strategy to foreground one aspect, this approach can run risks, particularly if we want to consider how we can enable serving teachers’ agency in relation to either learning or reform. A risk of foregrounding the personal aspect is that, in the practical-evaluative present of exercising agency, the personal capacity or disposition for agency might be seen to be a given, already assembled by the past trajectory and, therefore, not amenable to change at this moment. If we want to consider how we foster and develop teacher agency in the

present we might feel there is not much we can do about the past. However, some research has taken on this agenda by considering how early teacher education can better develop the capacity and disposition for agency so that at present (practical-evaluative) moments in the future, future serving teachers will have pasts (the iterative aspect) that are more conducive to exercising agency (Lipponen & Kumulainen 2011; Vaughn 2013; Soini et al 2015).

On the other hand, a risk of foregrounding features of the sociocultural context that are conducive to the exercise of agency is that we might slip into believing that if we create the right sociocultural context for teacher agency, teachers will utilise its resources and affordances, at least in ways consistent with their own personal disposition and capacity. However, this might not be the case. So what may be needed here is less a description of the ‘architecture’ of a sociocultural context conducive to the exercise of teacher agency and more of a consideration of whether and how teachers collectively make use of the resources or affordances that are available to them.

At the same time as the growing interest in teacher agency in relation to professional learning and reform, there has also been interest in professional learning communities as vehicles for both professional learning and school and system reform (e.g. Stoll et al 2006; Welsh Government 2011; Datnow 2012; Watson 2014). Some academic literature has made explicit connections between professional learning communities and teacher agency, seeing professional learning communities as an important affordance for the development and exercise of teacher agency both in terms of learning and responding to, or driving, reform (Masuda 2010; Lipponen & Kumpulainen 2011; Riveros, Newton & Burgess 2012). A related approach, which has had some influence, is the idea of relational agency (Edwards 2005; McNicholl 2013) which grows out of cultural and historical activity theory (CHAT) to argue that agency can be best developed and mobilised by making use of others. Similarly, Soini et al (2015) find that peer support is important affordance in developing agency among student teachers.

However, it has also been argued that evidence for the effectiveness of professional learning communities is scant and there is little detailed empirical evidence of what happens within

professional learning communities (Meirink, Meijer & Verloop 2007; Riveros, Newton & Burgess 2012). Riveros, Newton & Burgess (2012) also argue that developing teacher agency might be the way to increase the effectiveness of professional learning communities. So this leaves us with a conundrum: are professional learning communities an affordance for agency or is the exercise of teacher agency a pre-requisite for professional learning communities?

Learning Rounds, Instructional Rounds and the Scottish Context

The research reported here focuses on a form of professional learning community that has recently been popular in Scotland: Learning Rounds. As a form of professional development Learning Rounds has received national policy endorsement (Scottish Government 2010a; 2010b; 2012; 2013; National CPD Team 2011; Education Scotland 2011) and has been popular with schools, teachers and Local Authorities. An Education Scotland report (Education Scotland 2011) estimated that 24 (out of 32) Local Authorities had engaged in Learning Rounds. Learning Rounds involves educators coming together to observe teaching and learning across a number of classrooms in a single school. In a post observation debrief they use notes and other forms of recording, such as diagrams, taken during the observations to build up a detailed evidence-based picture of teaching and learning in the school. The intention is to use this to develop understanding of the teaching and learning practice in the school and make plans for what needs to be done next to develop that practice.

In order to understand the discussion of data later in this paper, it will be helpful to have a clearer view of some features of Learning Rounds in theory and practice. Learning Rounds is based on the Instructional Rounds practice developed in the United States of America (City et al 2009; Roberts 2012). City et al (2009) describe Instructional Rounds as a “four step process: identifying a problem of practice, observing, debriefing, and focusing on the next level of work” (City et al 2009, p. 6). They state that a problem of practice “is not a whim and does not emerge from thin air. It comes from data, dialogue, and current work. The problem of practice is grounded in some kind of evidence, preferably shareable evidence ... [it is] not just ... a hunch” (City et al 2009, p. 102). A “rich problem of practice” (ibid, p. 102):

- Focuses on the instructional core;
- Is directly observable;
- Is actionable (is within the school's or district's control and can be improved in real time);
- Connects to a broader strategy of improvement (school, system)
- Is high-leverage (if acted on , it would make a significant difference for pupil learning)

(City et al 2009, p.102)

City et al define the instructional core as “the teacher and the student in the presence of content” (ibid, p.22). Instructional Rounds need to focus on the relationship between these three and how changes to any one of them require or create changes in the other two. Focusing on one without connecting it to the others is not considered to be effective.

The second step, observing, is intimately linked to the debrief step and City et al (2009) consider most of requirements for observing in relation to debriefing. The debriefing step is sub-divided into four stages: description, analysis, prediction and evaluation. City et al (2009, p.34) insist that it is always “Description before analysis, analysis before prediction and prediction before evaluation”. There are two other requirements for the description stage. The first of these is the “grain size” (ibid, p.92) of the description. The finer grained the description, the more useful it is. The second requirement is that participants should not describe what they do not see, only what they do see (ibid, p.94). This is because describing what we do not see is considered an indication of what we think is important (i.e. evaluative) rather than evidence of what is happening in the room.

Another element of the effective use of Instructional Rounds is a “theory of action” (City et al 2009). A theory of action needs to be a “*statement of a causal relationship* between what I do ... and what constitutes a good result in the classroom ... [i]t must be *empirically falsifiable* [and] [i]t must be *open ended*” (City et al 2009, p.40, italics in original). The open ended requirement means that it must be able to be amended as more is discovered about the situation(s) being observed. In fact

having a finished theory of action is not the goal and once it is viewed as finished it “ceases to function as a learning tool and it becomes a symbolic artefact, useful primarily as a tool for legitimising ... authority” (ibid, p.53).

Although they claim to be based on Instructional Rounds, guidance for teachers in Scotland on Learning Rounds (Education Scotland 2011; National CPD Team 2011) differs in some respects from the practice outlined above. *The Learning Rounds Toolkit* (National CPD Team 2011) includes references to the importance of a “plan of action” (National CPD Team 2011, p.9) emerging from the post observation stage that relates to Instructional Rounds emphasis on a theory of action. However, it may be worth noting that this is a plan and not a theory so it could become a set of actions to be carried out rather than a developed understanding of the cause and effect of particular actions.

Most of the guidance on the practice of learning rounds, however, focuses on the observation and the debrief (National CPD Team 2011). Perhaps the most conspicuous absence in comparison to Instructional Rounds is the lack of attention given to developing a “rich problem of practice”. This is treated more briefly in learning rounds as “the theme of the observation is agreed by the group” (ibid, p.9). The relative lack of attention given to this area, and to the importance of connection to a theory of action, could result in Learning Rounds practice in Scotland that focuses on observation and debrief at the expense of other equally important parts of the process.

Learning Rounds is more than just a favoured method of professional development in Scotland. It can also be seen as part of the Scottish Government’s declared intention to leave the details of curriculum development to teachers. The recently introduced curriculum, Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive 2004) is intended to be less prescriptive than earlier Scottish curricula and this lack of prescription is intended to provide space for practitioners to develop practice through the exercise of their own agency. In 2006 the Scottish Executive (forerunner of the current Scottish Government) stated that Curriculum for Excellence

aims to engage teacher in thinking from first principles about their educational
aims and values and their classroom practice. The process is based upon

evidence of how change can be brought about successfully – through a climate in which practitioners share and develop ideas (Scottish Executive 2006, p.4)

As such Learning Rounds can be seen, in potential at least, as an important affordance for teacher agency.

In common with other forms of professional learning community, there is little published empirical research on what happens inside either Instructional Rounds or Learning Rounds. Rallis et al (2006) refer to transcripts of Instructional Rounds practice but these have not been published. The *Learning Rounds Overview Report 2008-2011* (Education Scotland 2011) provides a generalised account of the progress of learning rounds in Scotland and supports this with ‘vox populi’ quotes from participants. However, it does not include any detailed data on the nature of the actual learning rounds practices found in Scottish schools and local authorities. The only published empirical data is currently in Author 1 and Author 2 (2015).

The research reported here focuses on the ways in which Learning Rounds do (or do not) provide a practical-evaluative affordance for teacher agency and the extent to which that affordance is actually utilised for the exercise of teacher agency. This research seeks to make a contribution in three ways:

- Adding to an empirical understanding of what happens in professional learning communities
- Understanding how the practical-evaluative element of agency is (or is not) exercised in practice
- Considering what factors might affect the utilisation (or otherwise) of affordances for teacher agency

Method

For this research four Learning Round post-observation debriefing discussions were audio recorded and then transcribed (by Author 2). The discussions took place in four different schools, each in a different local authority. Each discussion was about an hour long. The transcripts of these meetings

were then read through iteratively by both authors (initially separately and then together) and analysed to identify what the teachers involved had observed, what they were discussing and how they were discussing it. We were particularly alert to the extent to which the key features of Instructional and Learning Rounds (summarised above) were evident.

Table 1 shows the four schools involved in the data gathering, their experience and training with Learning Rounds and the nature of the participants in the data. Each school was in a different local authority and they were chosen both because they were a convenience sample (Walliman and Buckler 2008) and a purposive sample (Jupp 2006). A convenience sample because they were known to be carrying out learning rounds at the time that were able to gather the data and a purposive sample because they represented four different Local Authorities and were, therefore, more likely to present a wider picture of practice than might have been found in a single Local Authority where experiences and training were more likely to be shared.

Table 1 about here

Findings

All four schools were making use of agreed foci for observations (see table 1) and it is worth remembering that the *Learning Rounds Toolkit* emphasises agreeing a focus for observation rather than developing a problem of practice. The observation foci of the four schools overlapped and some foci recurred in all schools. Most of the recurring foci grouped around techniques associated with assessment for learning (Wiliam 2011) and this probably reflects teaching and learning techniques that have been considered to be good practice recently in Scottish education. The foci for all schools were multiple, with some having a long list of different foci for the same observation.

Limitations of space mean findings from the data will only be summarised here. A more detailed presentation and discussion of this data can be found in Author 1 and Author 2 (2015).

In three of the four schools studied (Schools B, C and D) there was scant evidence in the transcripts that Learning Rounds were being utilised as an affordance for teacher agency. This lack of agency seems to be attributable to several features in the data.

None of the groups of teachers explicitly articulated a theory of action during the discussion (that is, articulated what their assumptions were about cause and effect in the classroom in relation to particular ‘problems of practice’). This resulted in an implicit theory of action that accepted externally produced models of good practice (for example, if peer assessment was used by the teacher this was taken as evidence of good practice). In places this seemed to slip into ‘audit’ in which teachers seemed to be most concerned with ‘ticking off’ whether they had seen certain strategies currently prescribed by the local authority or the school. Arguably the implicit nature of this theory of action mean that it could not be challenged and, therefore became a finished theory of action which in the words of City et al (2009, p.53) “ceases to function as a learning tool and it becomes a symbolic artefact, useful primarily as a tool for legitimising ... authority”; in this case, the authority of whoever had mandated the practices.

These limitations were sustained by: observing what the teacher was doing more than what pupils were doing (i.e. not focusing on the instructional core in City et al’s (2009) terms); observing and recording in molar units (e.g. ‘peer assessment happened’ rather than more fine grained observations); the large number of observation foci in some schools that led to an ‘audit’ approach rather than sustained and detailed consideration of a single focus.

In contrast, in the fourth school, school A there were emerging examples of teachers observing the effects of teachers’ actions by focusing on pupils responses in detail and making relatively fine grained distinctions about exactly how teachers carried out actions rather than just using molar categories. This led to the possibility that mandated views of good practice could be challenged or refined. However, in school A these insights did not feed back into challenging or refining a theory of action as a theory of action was never explicitly articulated. As a result the nascent insights tended to peter out and return to an audit approach.

Discussion

This section will consider how the findings from the data relate to affordances for teacher agency.

Teachers did not explicitly articulate assumptions about cause and effect in the classroom so they had no falsifiable theory to test. This meant, in practice, that they were left with an implicit theory of action. The implicit nature of this theory of action meant that it was never the object of scrutiny and, therefore, potential challenge or revision. As a result it became a 'finished' theory of action which City et al (2009) argue becomes a tool for legitimising authority. In this case, the authority of whoever had mandated the practices whether this was government, local authority or school management. Explicitly articulating a theory of action would have made it available to scrutiny, which would have provided an affordance for teacher agency through evaluation of that theory.

The other constraint linked to the absence of an explicitly articulated theory of action is the lack of attention in the teacher observations to the effects of teacher actions on pupils' learning. This meant that the teachers had no evidence by which to judge the claims of mandated good practice. This led to accepting evidence of the use of mandated good practice as, by default, the same thing as good practice. The relative lack of fine grained data had a similar effect. Describing in molar units (e.g. pupils carried out peer assessment) rather than attending to the specific details of pupils' actions and interactions mean that teachers could not clearly discriminate the effects of procedures in the classroom. The point here is that robust empirical classroom evidence is an affordance for teacher agency as it enables teachers to authoritatively evaluate mandated practices.

McNicholl (2013) argues that practitioner research can provide an affordance for agency as it can give teachers an authoritative basis for their views. This can be related to Pyhältö, Pietarinen and Soini's (2014) distinction between teachers who see themselves as objects or subjects of change. Teachers engaged in practitioner enquiry are the subjects of educational change not its objects. In connection with this, Vongalis-Macrow (2007) claims that the authority of teacher expertise is underutilized in educational change. Faced with apparently authoritative prescriptions from outside the classroom,

what Clandinin and Connelly (1995) have called the “rhetoric of conclusions”, teachers may feel that their views lack authority. Robust empirical evidence can provide this authority. Van der Heijden et al (2015) also identify “mastery” or expertise as an important personal factor in the exercise of agency, as do Toom, Pyhältö & Rust (2015). Teachers’ sense of their own expertise can be underpinned by their generation of robust empirical data. This is linked to Lipponen and Kumplulainen’s (2011) argument about the importance of social capital for agency. Social capital comes from being recognised within a community as someone whose ideas have value. One form of this is epistemic agency, which is the recognition of an ability to generate valid knowledge.

If not explicitly articulating a theory of action is a constraint on teacher agency, so is the lack of alternative discourses to explain what was happening in the classroom. The only discourse that was apparent in our data was policy discourse or policy discourse mediated through LA or school mandates. Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) report a similar experience in their research on teacher agency. In one sense, explicitly articulating a theory of action would have opened up the possibility of alternative discourses once the initial discourse had been explicitly surfaced rather than being invisible and, therefore, possibly normalised. However, there remains a question of where alternative discourses would come from. Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) report that the Scottish teachers in their research had a very similar set of views about teaching, learning and education more broadly, even though they were from diverse locations and sectors. This was the same in our research reported here. This reduces the chances that alternative discourses will come from within the group; a condition that Bridwell-Smith (2015) identifies as an important affordance for practical-evaluative agency. Possibly our experience and Biesta, Priestley and Robinson’s (2015), in this respect, can be accounted for by a culture of performativity imposed upon teachers which means that they become ‘captured by the discourse’ (Bowe, Gewirtz & Ball 1994) of government, local authority and school policy. This discourse provides the landscape in which they have to frame their actions in a daily basis and, therefore, the primary resource for talking and thinking about practice.

City et al (2009) suggest the use of external sources of understanding in Instructional Rounds such as academic readings and models. However, guidance on Learning Rounds (National CPD team 2011) makes no reference to the value of these and they were not apparent in the examples of Learning Rounds recorded in this research. Biesta et al (2015) identify the absence of alternative discourses as a problem for teacher agency. Reeves and I'Anson (2014) touch on a similar area when they describe teachers using others' academic discourse as an affordance for their own agency. This can either be to provide alternative repertoires for interpreting practice or it can lend authority to teachers own views when apparently authoritative academic discourse supporting teachers beliefs can be used as a counterweight to the apparently authoritative discourse of policy. Similarly Bridwell-Mitchell (2015) argues others' research can provide alternative repertoires and Biesta and Tedder (2007, p.11) write about "manoeuvre amongst repertoires".

An issue similar to the lack of alternative discourses from external sources (for example, educational research or theory) is the lack of alternative voices in the group. As previously reported, Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) found a relatively diverse group of Scottish teachers (geographical location and sectors) shared a very similar discourse with its origins in policy. This was also found to be the case in our research. Bridwell-Mitchell (2015) argues that the right balance of cohesion and, importantly, *diversity* in a community is necessary for practical-evaluative agency to be exercised. Diversity, in terms of discourse at least, seemed to be lacking in our data. One interesting similarity here is with some research into medical rounds (e.g. Weinholtz 1991; Birtwistle, Houghton & Rostill 2000) where it is argued that the dominance of doctors in the process leads to conceptualisations of patients' conditions and needs which are too narrow. It is suggested that the inclusion of other medical professionals in the process would give alternative and broader conceptualisations of patients' needs. A similar case could be made for Learning Rounds and professional learning communities more generally if they are to be resources for teacher agency. The careful and considered inclusion of people who are likely to have alternative experiences and perspectives could enhance the possibilities for agency.

This point is also linked to the ways in which teachers' agency can be limited in terms of scope.

Pyhältö, Pietarinen and Soini (2014, p.309) argue that a "central challenge" for teachers is to broaden the scope of their perceived educational expertise beyond the technical details of classroom interactions to include larger issues such as the goals and purposes of education. Likewise Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) point to a lack of discourses among teachers that constructs education in terms other than the technical-rational concerns of "efficiency" to include questions of purpose and value. Vongalis-Macrow (2007, p.436), similarly identifies a 'diminution' of the aspects of teacher agency related to authority and autonomy and the increase of obligations which restricts teachers' agency narrowly to decisions about techniques for teaching and learning in the classroom. In the same vein, Buchanan (2015) cites Hargreaves (2000) to suggest teachers have become post-professionals who implement decisions made by others. Similarly, Riveros, Newton and Burgess (2012) suggest that professional learning communities tend to trivialise the notion of teacher practice because the theorization of what teacher practice is (including scope, in our view) is under-developed.

The data discussed here suggest that, in their current form, Learning Rounds (and by extension many professional learning communities) are technical-rationalist in that, at best, they focus on 'what works' in technical terms rather than asking broader questions about the nature and purpose of education and the identities of those involved. As Edwards (2015) cautions they may only be affordances for weak evaluation. This is evaluation only of the effectiveness of certain means to achieve ends given by others.

A related point is the persistence and influence of accountability. Priestley et al (2012) cite Biesta (2004) to argue that accountability is more of a constraint on teacher agency than the prescription of means. As long as the goals and measure of success are set by others and teachers are held to account in relation to these, the scope for teacher agency will be limited. So although Learning Rounds look to be a valuable affordance for teacher agency, as long as they are used in the service of achieving goals set and 'measured' by others, that agency will be constrained. Van der Heijden et al (2015) argue that teachers need to be risk takers if they are going to exercise agency and in the context of high stakes accountability the force of this can be seen.

The limited scope of current Learning Rounds practice can open up questions about who owns the process and how this relates to the exercise of agency. Datnow (2012) writes about “formally organized” learning communities as potentially stifling teacher enquiry or perhaps, in this case, framing and directing it in certain ways. Vongalis-Macrow (2007) claims that teachers are given ‘professional makeovers’ as new forms of PD are imposed on them with little ownership. The Learning Rounds researched here were largely set up by the teachers involved. However, the nature and purpose of the Learning Rounds process can be seen as defined by policy and by Local Authority and school management, given the official endorsement and fostering of the process. As a result questions can be raised about the extent to which teachers have ownership of how the process is defined and its purposes, even if they participate voluntarily. Ketelaar et al (2012) discuss the importance of ownership (which they claim is under researched in educational innovations). If teachers don’t own Learning Rounds this may have a constraining effect on its ability to be an affordance for teacher agency with scope beyond the technical-rational. As part of ownership Ketelaar et al (2012) also identify the importance of clarity about the “goals and means” (p.280) of an innovation. Lack of clarity, they argue, can lead to false clarity “an oversimplification of the innovation” (ibid, p.280) this is similar to Watson’s (2014) argument about pedagogisation in educational innovations through which they are (over)simplified for the purposes of transmission. Author 1 and Author 2 (2015) found that teachers participating in Learning Rounds often thought about them in terms of the procedures they had been taught rather than the underlying purposes of those procedures. This lack of ownership of purpose, which among its effects reduces the ability to evaluate the success of the practice and make informed revisions to it, is itself an constraint on agency.

Another way of thinking about this ownership is through Stillman and Anderson’s (2015) idea of appropriation rather than accommodation. They write about the “dialectical interplay” (ibid, p.722) between identities and engagement with policy. Appropriation involves identification with the policy rather than just carrying it out. In the case of Learning Rounds this dialectical interplay with identities could be related to whether teachers see themselves as generators of knowledge and policy rather than

implementers. It also relates to whether they see themselves as generators of purpose and value in education as well as technical classroom procedures. This will affect how they make use of the possibilities of Learning Rounds as affordances.

Ownership of purposes, and perceptions of the scope of those purposes, is also connected to how understanding of learning rounds is developed in teachers. Author 1 and Author 2 (2015) identify that in the USA teachers' use of Instructional Rounds was developed through long engagement with the academics who developed the process. In contrast, in Scotland most teachers were given a single training event or accessed online materials with no training. This can result in Learning Rounds practice being assimilated into existing school cultures (what City et al (2009) call the "pull to the black hole") rather than reconstructing cultures with enhanced teacher agency. Author and Author 2 conclude that Learning Rounds could be enhanced through longer engagement between teachers and proponents of Learning Rounds as an affordance for teacher agency. A similar situation was found by Pyhältö Pietarinen and Soini (2014) whose research suggests that agency could be developed through sustained collaborative engagement between teachers and academics.

Conclusion and Implications

If we want to enhance the role of Learning Rounds (and by extension other forms of professional learning community) as affordances for practical-evaluative teacher agency, we need to pay attention to a number of aspects:

- Teachers need to explicitly articulate the assumptions that exist about cause and effect in the classroom and use professional learning communities as a way of critically examining these assumptions.
- This requires that teachers generate a fine grained and nuanced body of data about the effects of differing classroom practices.
- Professional learning communities should be constructed to ensure that a diversity of voices is present.

- Ways should be found to move beyond technical-rationalist foci for observation and discussion to questions about, for example, purposes, values, identities or relationships. Ensuring a diversity of voices could be one way to achieve this.
- ‘Academic’ practices should be used as a resource for agency. This can be in terms of existing research and theory providing alternative discourses for observations, or in terms of existing research and theory lending weight to the authority of teachers’ interpretations as a counterbalance to the perceived authority of policy prescriptions. Teachers’ authority can also be underpinned through enhanced academic credentials for teachers or by teachers generating robust data. It should be noted that this is in contrast to those who have seen the academy as potentially producing a ‘rhetoric of conclusions’ (Clandinin and Connelly 1995) that can be inimical to teacher agency. It also runs counter to much current thinking about preferred models for professional learning which advocate teachers working with teachers often without a clear role for the academy. While it can be the case that certain forms of academic prescription and perceived authority can constrain teacher agency, properly utilised, academic knowledge, practices and qualifications can be an affordance for teacher agency as a counterbalance to the perceived authority or apparent monologue of policy.
- More time working collaboratively with informed facilitators of collaborative learning practices can enhance teacher agency in the longer term. This is in contrast to believing that handing the process over to teachers from the outset is a guarantee of ownership and teacher agency.
- It may not be possible to change affordances without changing identities. This is obviously a reciprocal relationship but this study suggests that the iterational aspects of identity and practice may prove resistant to changes in practical-evaluative affordances. We need to pay more attention to how we support identity shifts beyond just changing the architecture of present affordances. This might be through longer collaboration between teachers and others, more support of teachers’ practitioner enquiry, greater prevalence of continuing academic study for teachers or some other means. In this respect at least, it seems that a partial answer

to the conundrum of what comes first, agency or effective PLCs, is that we cannot rely on the PLC process to effect changes in agency without seeking to develop identity and its associated agency in other ways too.

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