

Networking as Learning Communities: The Potential of Networking to Foster Collaborative Learning among Teacher Professionals

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Abstract

The effective nature of learning communities in fostering learning among teacher professionals has been widely documented in the literature. The present article expands on this thinking by exploring how networking as learning communities facilitates learning among teacher professionals. The findings of my doctoral study which explored how teachers learn by understanding how teachers learn about assessment, through establishing what teachers know about assessment, how they have come to acquire this knowledge, how they explain their practice of learner assessment and unpacking why they offer the explanations they do with regards to their assessment choices, form the backdrop against which this article was conceptualised. The study was a qualitative one, within a case-study design. Three Natural Science school educators, who taught at the same primary school, formed the research participants in the study. Document analysis, semi-structured interviews and observations were the instruments used to collect data, which was then analyzed within the interpretivist paradigm. The findings suggest that networking as learning communities facilitates learning among teacher professionals in a multitude of different ways, all of which serve to advance and enhance teacher learning among teachers. The article concludes with a discussion surrounding the implications of the findings of the study for teacher learning.

Keywords: Learning communities, collaborative learning, learning conversations, reflective practice, adaptive expertise, higher-order intellectualism.

Introduction

The benefits of collaborative learning in generating diverse positive outcomes has been widely acknowledged (Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Johnson et al, 2000; Meiers & Ingvarson 2005, Vedario, 2009; Scott & Scott, 2010). Collaborative inquiry has supported teachers to reflect on, understand, articulate and develop pedagogy in different school contexts that has in turn demonstrated significant positive changes in teacher beliefs, knowledge, practice, efficacy and student literacy outcomes (Deppeler & Harvey, 2004; Deppeler, 2006, 2007; Dick, 2005; Meiers & Ingvarson 2005). Garmston & Wellman (1999) report that collaboration tends to be an essential activity that characterizes high performing and

improving schools. These sentiments are echoed by Kaagan (2009), who contends that gaining knowledge and skills to join forces are useful tools for change and improvement. Mycye (2001) asserts that working within the context of a group may prove to be beneficial to fostering sustained learning, as participants within the group develop a sense of ownership and commitment to self-improvement, thereby allowing for continuous development to become a key facet of the learning process. Moreover, the three crucial dimensions that underpin teacher learning, namely, inquiry, reflection and sharing transpire within the context of collaborative learning (Lieberman, 2000).

The development of a joint-work philosophy, a central feature of collaborative learning that brings teachers together and creates interdependence among them, occurs within the context of networking (Billett, 2001). Networking encourages a culture of co-learning and creates opportunities to connect and reconnect with other educators. Such opportunities are enabled within the context of learning communities, which tend to provide a supportive platform for teachers to bring about meaningful changes for effective teaching and learning to ensue (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2003; Lieberman, 2000; Warren-Little, 2002).

Whilst the above discussion presents a case for the benefits of collaborative teacher learning the question as to how teacher's continual engagement in expressing their ideas to others contributes to their own learning, still persists. The present article attempts to address this critical question by examining the process and content aspects of teacher learning as teachers engage in networking as learning communities to acquire learning and to enhance their understanding about the new forms of assessment. The article is set within the context of Department of Education (DoE) initiatives to implement the new policy pertaining to the new forms of assessment within the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) (DoE, 2002). The training workshops, which served as the starting point to initiate and sustain collaborative teacher learning through learning about the new forms of assessment provides the point of departure for exploring the process and content issues associated with teacher learning. The question of what and how teachers learn when networking with colleagues is also explored within the context of this article.

Literature Review

There has been a marked shift from professional development that predominantly involved attending seminars and external training programmes, to professional learning that is central to teachers' work, where teachers construct meaning based on their own classroom experience, reflection and active collaboration with peers to create a learning community (Bell & Gilbert, 1996; Hill et al., 1995; Retallick, 1997; Cuttance, 2001; Vedario, 2009; Scott & Scott, 2010). The shift in emphasis from what teachers do to what they know, what their sources of knowledge are and how those sources influence their work in classrooms, has spurred a rethink on the way teacher learning has traditionally been viewed (Lewis, 2002). Teaching and learning are now both viewed as processes in which participants deeply engage with ideas in order to create meaning (Wenger, 1998; Biggs, 1999; Kynashlanti et al, 2006; Duncan-Howell, 2010; Avalos, 2011). Moreover, the value of practice-oriented learning that involves relying on peers, and that is based on real-time needs, which provides closer coherence and integration of the pedagogies being promoted to the actual teaching situation, thereby linking theory to practice has been duly recognized (So, Lossman, Lim & Jacobson, 2009).

Whilst opportunities for learning may present themselves in the form of workshops, structured courses, faculty and district meetings and school-based professional conversations (Wenzlaff and Wieseman, 2004), Kynashlathi et al. (2006) assert, sharing knowledge with the school community and colleagues is invaluable in promoting learning. Feden & Vogel (2003) concur, adding that in sharing knowledge and experience with their peers, teachers can

strengthen teaching practice, advance their learning and foster authentic and meaningful conceptual change. In addition, Viadero (2009) asserts that teachers who have consistent opportunities to work with effective colleagues also improve in their teaching effectiveness. Further, the rationale for the existence of learning communities is aptly explored in the sentiments below:

“Because no teacher can possibly possess all the knowledge, skills, time, and resources needed to ensure high levels of learning for all his or her students, educators at a professional learning community school work in collaborative teams” (Buffman, Mattos, & Weber, 2009, p. 51).

It is against this backdrop, that the notion of “learning communities” has been receiving on-going and increased prominence ((Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996; Schomoker, 1996; Fogarty & Pete, 2007; Judson & Lawson, 2007; Vescio et al., 2008). Learning communities encompass groups of education practitioners who meet to inquire systematically about aspects of their own work in schools and classrooms, with the intention of improving practice and enhancing students’ learning in educational settings (Richardson, 1998)

Within the context of such communities the reconstruction of previous knowledge and beliefs becomes possible as teachers gain new information and in this way build on their own ideas and experiences, as well as those of others, in order to work on a specific agenda (Wenger, 2004). Moreover, learning communities are seen as offering valuable opportunities for authentic and personalised learning (Duncan-Howell, 2010). In addition, learning communities provide the platform for the informal exchange of good practice and peer learning (Avalos, 2011). Through collectively developed understandings, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire of resources, learning within the context of learning communities is fundamentally a social and constructive activity that depends on the collective and cumulative input of the community to disseminate ideas, stimulate discussion, and widen the oral and written discourse about schools and schooling (Richardson, 1998; Wenger, 2004). The ever-growing awareness of the benefits of incorporating collegial interaction and shared reflection as a critical component of teacher professional development has given rise to the emergence of models and programs for teacher learning that includes learning communities as a platform for enhancing teacher learning (Scott & Scott (2010). The present article explores how teachers network with one another, to form learning communities, to enhance their understanding of assessment within the then National Curriculum Statement (NCS) framework.

Louis et al. (1996) believe that the success of learning communities can be attributed to the existence of shared norms and values among teachers, the focus on student learning, teachers’ engagement with reflective dialogue, their tendency to challenge the previously private and isolated nature of classroom practice, as well as their preoccupation with promoting collaboration between teachers. Furthermore, the flexible and informal yet highly effective nature of learning communities serves to enrich learning opportunities among educators (Schomoker, 1996). In addition, once a community of learners is set up, it has the capacity to grow into meaningful professional development experiences where teachers are presented with numerous opportunities for renewal of their knowledge (Fogarty & Pete, 2007). Driven by learning conversations that enable teachers to co-create the understanding of issues and strengthen their skills in making sense of these issues collectively, learning communities afford teachers the platform to develop and strengthen their expertise (Judson & Lawson, 2007).

There is a considerable volume of literature supporting the merits of learning groups in providing a context for the teacher's professional growth, where the professional learning of teachers is shared and problematised (McLaughlin, 1997; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999; Warren-Little, 2002; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2003; Viadero, 2009; Scott &

Scott, 2010). However, whilst the pivotal role of networking in positively influencing school reform has been duly recognized (Adams, 2000; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Lieberman & Miller, 1999; Lieberman & Wood, 2001, 2003; Pennell & Firestone, 1996, 1998; Useem, Buchanan, Meyers, & Maule-Schmidt, 1995), Plauborg (2007) suggests that the questions of what and how teachers learn when collaborating with colleagues requires further exploration. Further, issues pertaining to the kinds of knowledge and skills that teachers acquire in conjunction with their collaboration, also lacks clarity, as does matters relating to how learning acquired through collaboration affects teacher practices (Plauborg, 2007). This article sets out to address these key issues as it explores how teachers network to form learning communities in their pursuit of acquiring knowledge and enhancing their assessment practices of learner assessment.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design included a qualitative research approach which sought to establish how teachers make sense of their learning activities within an interpretive framework, located within a case study. Semi-structured, iterative interviews, document analysis and observations formed the instruments used in the study. Data were presented as narrative stories constructed from the semi-structured interviews to explore the meanings that participants ascribed to their experiences of learning about learner assessment.

Employing a holistic approach with a view to understanding teacher learning through the lens of assessment was what this study set out to do. Adopting a qualitative mode of study enabled the researcher to illuminate and explore complex issues surrounding the scholarship of teacher learning, while simultaneously acknowledging the dynamic nature of these issues. The data that was collected through intensive interview sessions that were conducted both, prior to and after the observation of lessons, form the central focus of this article. Interviews were iterative in nature, where participants were probed to detail their notions on assessment and learning, enabling the researcher to explore their angle or slant on the issues at hand.

Research Site and Participants

In this study, purposive sampling was achieved through network sampling (participant referral) as advocated by McMillan and Schumacher (2001), where each respondent or group was suggested by the previous group or individual. The study focus provided the criteria for selection of the case study school and included, by means of an established network of teachers for identification, a primary school where teacher professional development in assessment had been completed and where teachers were engaged with new forms of assessment practices as prescribed by the assessment policies for schools. Sterling Primary, a co-educational primary school in the North Durban region of KwaZulu- Natal, with a population of 421 learners of varied ethnic, religious, cultural and racial groups formed the research site.

The sample for this study consisted of three Intermediate phases for Natural Science educators: from Grade 4, Grade 5 and Grade 6. The intention was to maximise the utility of the data to their full potential and to provide every opportunity to exploit the research context for context-rich information that may reside in more than one person experiencing the same kinds of activities (receiving training and implementing a new assessment process in a school across the three grades of the intermediate phase of schooling). Priya, the Grade 4 educator had 19 years of teaching experience but no formal qualifications and limited training in the subject –discipline. Her qualifications were inclined towards the Humanities. Kajil, the Grade 5 teacher had qualified as a Natural Science teacher, with 24 years of teaching experience.

Neel, the head of department and Grade 6 educator, had qualified as a Maths and Science teacher, with 27 years of teaching experience.

Data Presentation

The study utilised a combination of grounded and apriori approaches to the analysis of the data. Emergent themes from the literature surrounding assessment and teacher learning formed the basis of designing the research instruments, and helped identify the themes for analysis. In addition, the emergent trends evident from the data that were collected also helped to shape and identify the themes for analysis. In addition, conclusions and theories were drawn around the area of teacher learning, as well as from the themes that emerged from the data. This was in addition to the supporting literature on teacher learning and assessment. A combination of two techniques, namely discourse analysis and content analysis, were adopted to analyse the data generated. Discourse analysis is concerned with how meaning is constructed and involves the study of both text and the context (Griffin, 1994). This primarily involves studying and analysing the text, which basically is a record of an event where something was communicated (Fairclough, 2000). In terms of the present study this would refer to the interview transcripts, observation field notes and assessment planning documents. Through an analysis and interpretation of these sources, ideological facts and beliefs were presented to create identities for the participants. A deeper analysis was then embarked upon and this entailed looking at what angle or point of view was being presented. In other words, framing the details into a coherent whole by looking at teacher learning in context helped to subsequently construct the narratives.

The presentation of data assumes a thematic approach, where themes that emerged from the interviews, are discussed. Themes were constructed from a detailed study of the tape-recordings and the transcripts of the interviews. Content analysis enabled common categories to be established through coding, and in this way, themes were identified. Selected segments of written text extracted from interview transcripts are included to highlight and support the themes. The actual words of the participants are shown in italics. The intention was to present the data in meaningful ways that highlight the key findings of the study.

Findings and Discussion

This section of the article focuses on a deep analysis of the form and nature of learning that ensued as a result of the participants engaging in collaborative learning, in their pursuit of acquiring knowledge and competence in learner assessment. Collaborative learning manifested itself as networking, in the context of this study and assumed both formal and informal means, although the latter appeared to be the most preferred and frequent means of learning. Participants in the study networked with educators from both their own school, as well as educators from schools other than their own.

Learning assumed a formal nature at the workshops attended and through the subsequent formation of learning-area committees to support educators in learning about the new forms of assessment. Informal collaborations took the form of casual conversations in a variety of contexts and are explored to a greater extent as the analysis and discussion unfolds. For the purpose of this article, the formal and informal means of networking will not be treated as separate entities. Rather, these will be examined as mutually inclusive, with regards to the benefits that they both have in fostering and enhancing collaborative learning amongst teachers.

Forced Compliance as a Means of Initiating Collaborative Learning

The scene for networking through encouraging teachers to work collaboratively with one another was set at the training workshops that participants had attended. Aside from serving as a stimulus for learning, the workshops presented opportunities for learning. This became evident when the participants began to engage with the new assessment forms, through their engagement with policy documents and through collaborative interaction with colleagues at the sessions, allowing for co-operative learning to ensue as educators engaged in dialogue and discussion with one another in the process of creating meaning. Peer support became readily available as the participants interacted with one another in a group context to advance their learning. Hence, the workshops that the participants attended were not just managerial. Rather, they could be viewed as a deliberate attempt by the DoE to initiate and sustain learning and in this way, sow the seeds for collaborative learning to ensue among participants. Slavin (1995) points to the benefits of such support within the collaborative context, suggesting that as teachers learn from one another through discussions, differences in thinking emerge, providing the platform for flawed reasoning to be brought to the fore and explored, so that new ideas, understandings and insights can be developed. Further, learning community participation facilitates more teacher-driven and situated forms of professional development, as teachers work together on problems of their own choosing that which relates directly to their practice (Whitehouse, McCloskey & Ketelhut, 2010).

Confidence Building– The Key to Collaborative Learning

Affirmation is an important facet of learning to promote and sustain teacher learning, and leads to confidence building. Perhaps the sharing and exchange of ideas is an important self-confidence building activity, as the feeling of being listened to and acknowledged within a small, closed interaction space could very well serve to enhance the process of learning. Moreover, a sense of being able to influence others also serves to reinforce the learning process, as evident in the case of Priya.

“Some of my colleagues take my ideas and use them, so I feel confident about using these ideas in class myself. It has been reassuring that many of my colleagues, have complimented my work.”

Kajil’s confidence was also reinforced and her feelings of alienation thwarted, through networking.

“By listening to my colleagues speak about the difficulties they have been experiencing, I have realised that we are all grappling with similar issues. I don’t feel so alone anymore. Through listening to how teachers have modified the different forms of assessment to suit their circumstances, I have been inspired to try out some of their suggestions myself. The results have been quite astonishing and I feel I have come a long way”.

The above sentiments suggest that networks, through their spirit of sharing common concerns, offer teachers a comfortable space where they articulate their challenges, reflect on their experiences of such challenges, and learn from the pitfalls and successes of their colleagues. Consequently, being part of a collective with common ideals enables teachers to muster up the confidence to try out new ideas, to reflect on the implementation of such ideas and in this way advance learning. To this end, Lloyd & Duncan-Howell (2010) assert that the sense of belonging fostered by learning communities through discussions and chats can lead to teachers providing anecdotal evidence of successful practice change that encourages others to take new approaches. This resonates with the thinking that when teachers participate in learning communities, they experience a reduction in feelings of isolation and consequently, feel more positive about the profession (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Lieberman, 2000).

Learning Conversations – The Outcomes of Learning Communities

Smaller et al (2004) assert that most human learning occurs incidentally, but speaks of knowledge acquisition that is informal, yet deliberate and sustained. Day (1999) highlights the advantage that informal mechanisms have over more formal ones, as the former are more in synch with the goals of teachers as Neel's sentiments below suggests.

“Most of the time, we have informal chats in the corridors, in the staff-room or over the telephone. We all speak the same language, within the teaching group”

To this end, Freeman and Richards (1996) speaks of local language being the vehicle through which teachers explain what goes on in their teaching on a daily basis; this provides them with a means of expressing to themselves and their peers, the conceptions of practice they bring to teaching as well as those which they are socialised on in the job. Further, through their interaction with colleagues, participants began to form reflective learning circles where they also acquired knowledge, resonating with the thinking that, even casual encounters that result in discussions of teaching practice can help develop competence among educators, resulting in the facilitation of meaningful learning (Borko, 2004). Typically such interaction manifests itself as what, Le Cornu et al. (2003) term “*learning conversations*”, which refers to:

“The nature of dialogue that occurs at the sites of learning and which enables teachers to make sense of their learning” (Le Cornu et al, 2003: 6).

Learning conversations engages its participants in a deeper way than an ordinary exchange of ideas might, as it looks into things, with the idea of making meaning and/or coming to a deeper understanding. Further since such interactions moves beyond merely, describing, but also involves analysing and problematizing, learning conversations serve to advance deep learning as was evident in Priya's assertion:

“From these discussions we learn from each others' experiences, through talking about our assessment practices.”

DeFour & Eaker (1998) assert that when teachers engage in reflective talks with one another, observe and offer feedback about their colleague's teaching, jointly develop curriculum and assessment practices, work together to translate new programs and strategies into practice, share material resources, and collectively become involved in problem solving, action-research and continuous development, learning is more likely to be meaningful and for this reason, sustained.

Evaluation and Modification of Personal Ideas – The Process Reinforced in Learning Communities

As the networking members pool together through the sharing of thoughts, ideas, strategies and knowledge, a deep level of engagement ensues. Kajil's sentiments below allude to learning about the assessment process, where assessment tasks are designed and shared with colleagues to explore issues of credibility, appropriateness, gaps and coherence.

“After setting an assessment task, especially a test that I deem suitable for my learners, I would ask a colleague from staff to look over the task and offer his or her input, with regards to whether or not the task would be appropriate for the learners that it was targeted at. I would listen to the suggestions offered and take these into consideration before I actually carried out this assessment task in class. Such suggestions would often include the comments on the format of the test and the levels of questioning. I would review the comments from my

colleagues and re-examine my assessment task in line with these comments. Often, I would even modify my assessment task to incorporate the suggestions of my colleagues.”

The above sentiments suggest that networking implies a deeper level of engagement that involves more than merely acquiring new information and extracting this information when required (Colucci-Gray & Fraser, 2008). Moreover, it involves effective dialogue that leads to shared understanding, where the platform for working collaboratively to solve problems and find workable solutions to common issues and concerns can be established (Palmer, 1998). Through engaging with the ideas and the innovations and experiences of others, teachers begin to explore ways of improving their teaching and supporting one another as they work to change their practice (Moll, 2003). Tzur (2007) concurs with these sentiments, adding that peers unanticipated actions can serve to initiate further reflection, thereby facilitating learning. In this way, networking contributes to teacher learning partly by honouring teachers' expertise and by depending on it to situate and modify outside expertise (McDonald & Klein, 2003). Moreover, the role of “critical friend” which is enabled within the context of learning communities supports teachers to critically examine practices and the assumptions underlying them to enable access to an enlarged community of discourse (McLaughlin, 1997; Groundwater-Smith, 1998; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2003). To this end, Feiman-Nemser (2001) asserts that in adopting a critical stance, learning communities exude a commitment to inquiry.

Higher Order Intellectualism through Fostering Adaptive Expertise

Hammerness et al (2005) emphasize the need for educators to develop higher-order abilities to guide decisions and to reflect on practices. Sharing knowledge implies levels of engagement greater than those required for simple deposit and withdrawal of information, as is evident in Neel's sentiments:

“I show my colleagues examples of the kinds of assessments that I use. We also compile lists of problems that educators may be experiencing with regards to their teaching and assessing and we speak about possible ways of addressing such problems. Teachers feel more comfortable to voice their concerns and opinions within such a forum, as teachers within the group can relate to the practical realities on the ground.”

Through intellectualising in this way, participants had the opportunity of developing their reflective capacities, their articulation of competence and their introspection capabilities, leading to further learning, signalling deep learning (McAlister et al., 1997). This resonates with the thinking that networking is invaluable in contributing to higher levels of intellectualising and enhancing learning (Feldman, 1999). Priya's assertion below provides further evidence of the merits of learning collaboratively within the context of formal network structures.

“After designing an assessment activity, I would ask members of the learning area committee to look over the assessment activity and offer their input with regard to the suitability of the task. The feedback that I received through this forum has been instrumental in developing my competence in the assessment of learners, and I feel that I have grown as a professional as a result of such interactions with my colleagues”.

Moreover, the ability of the participants to converse eloquently about what they know and do suggests a sense of deep learning and expert knowledge, and possible inspiration for the process of teacher learning and content learning. Such learning may not necessarily be about the assessment of teaching (content issues) but about engagement (a higher form of learning leading to becoming an expert). These include developing listening skills, reflexive skills, transferring skills and adaptation skills, all of which constitute characteristics of being an

expert (Horii, 2007). Such a situation, as was evident in the located study, can be likened to the notion of a mature teacher learning community where teachers engage in “honest talk” that fosters the development of reflective practice and adaptive expertise (Lieberman & Miller, 2008). In this respect, Osterman & Kottkamp (2003) assert that due to the deeply ingrained nature of our behavioural patterns, it is sometimes difficult to develop a critical perspective on our own behaviour. However, analysis occurring in a collaborative and cooperative environment is likely to lead to greater learning, as is evident in the discussion above.

Adaptive expertise implies an understanding of the evolving nature of teaching and learning to develop a different kind of knowledge for teaching that entails knowledge of how to interpret and reflect on classroom practice (Sherin, 2004). Furthermore, since teacher learning communities utilise adaptive expertise from internal and external sources, such learning can be shared across different learning contexts, thereby providing expanded opportunities for teachers to critically assess shared pedagogical and content knowledge in context (Hatano & Oura, 2003).

The above discussion suggests that the nature and kinds of learning that do transpire within the context of networking are far more in-depth than it would appear to be, fostering higher-order intellectualism.

Conclusion

Networking for learning, as in the context of this article, reveals a space outside of the content of learning. By implication, teachers do not necessarily learn from others in the network by merely sharing their experiences, thoughts and insights. More than this, the context of networking also provides a platform to learn. The platform in this instance refers to attributes that promote learning. These attributes include confidence building, affirmation by and from others and higher-order intellectualising, suggesting that learning is internal, complex, and can happen as a result of a confluence of thought processes stimulated by reflections on networking with others. The activities affiliated to networking include fostering discussion and exchange of ideas through learning conversations, evaluation and modification of ideas to solve problems and promoting higher order intellectualism through fostering adaptive expertise, pointing to the highly beneficial nature of networking in the learning process. Ultimately, the findings of this study are in congruence with the thinking that learning networks provide an opportunity for its members to create as well as receive knowledge. Clearly the participants in the study were involved in creating learning opportunities and designing learning experiences to suit their own individual circumstances. This is an important consideration, especially if we acknowledge the sentiments that the power of learning conversations lies in the fact that the focus of control in the learning process remains within each person, as each person creates their own constructed new meanings through their participation and interaction within learning communities (Le Cornu et al, 2003).

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