

# Collegial Collaboration among Teachers in Polytechnics

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Many developers of teacher education emphasise a communal approach as an essential element in a teacher's work, entailing an ability to renew oneself professionally, discuss relevant issues, and solve problems together with other people. In this view, the strengths of a school culture include a management system that encourages all members of the work community to commit themselves to development work, shared responsibility and decision-making.

There are increased demands for a dialogue to be initiated among teachers, between teachers and students, and between teachers and representatives of working life. The most recent studies indicate that the work of developing polytechnics is hampered by a bureaucratic and hierarchical operation structure that stems from old traditions and large organisations.

It has been suggested that multiprofessionalism, where the aim is to cross the boundaries separating traditional professional domains, should be adopted as one of the principles to underpin polytechnics' educational activities. This involves the creation of a new operation culture, which generates conflicts and uncertainties but also collaboration and problem solving of a new kind.

## Purpose of the study

The study deals with collegial collaboration among teachers in polytechnics. The aim of the study is to describe teachers' conceptions of collaboration and collaboration practices. Its theoretical background is derived from approaches used in research on teacher thinking and in organisational studies. Central notions and starting points include a participative perspective on learning how to collaborate (Lave and Wenger 1991), school as a loosely coupled organisation (Orton and Weick 1990), and a micropolitical perspective on collaboration (Ball 1987, Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002, Salo 2002).

## Research questions

*1. How is collaboration understood by individual teachers and how do they define it in the context of their own work?*

Analysing teachers' conceptions of collaboration is an important initial task in this study. In schools, like elsewhere, collaboration and teamwork have gained popularity as it is believed that they enable results that individual employees cannot achieve on their own (Kärkkäinen 1999). Traditionally, the interaction culture at school is dominated by the independence pertaining to a teacher's work, which allows the teacher to define also the time and place of collaboration. It is thus hardly surprising that the tension between collegiality and individualism has proved a tricky element within educational work cultures. Individualism is underpinned in school, for instance by the role expectations for the teaching profession, by the fact that the outcomes of a teacher's work are difficult to define, and by the way in which teachers' work is organised. Teachers are considered to perform their duties on their own as emphatically autonomous professionals who base their actions on pedagogical and domain-specific expertise. It is recognised that collegiality is necessary, but this recognition is not reflected in, for example, decision-making within the school organisation.

*2. How does the organisational culture of a polytechnic support teachers' collaboration practices?*

This research question concerning the work organisation relates to the context of collaboration. The school organisation creates a collaborative context that differs from many other work communities, particularly because of the autonomous character of teachers' work. The school community has often been described as a combination of an official and an unofficial organisation. Here, the official organisation refers to a public procedure for preparing, planning and implementing matters,

while the unofficial organisation denotes the social network and the school reality that emerge through various encounters and interpretations and constitute the most powerful single factor affecting a teacher's everyday life. This everyday life is dominated by the teacher's private arena, which is only loosely linked with shared decision-making and management (Orton and Weick 1990, Salo 2002). If polytechnics are to develop into learning organisations, there must be collaboration among teachers in the fields of both pedagogical and vocational expertise. This cannot be achieved solely through official decision-making and management.

### *3. What is the role of collaboration in teacher's professional socialisation?*

This research question concerning teachers' professional competence is linked with the development of collaboration skills during training and on the job. Collaboration and interaction skills are a significant component of a teacher's professional competencies. In a changing operation environment, the need to master a professional knowledge base and create new knowledge makes collaboration skills and a community orientation even more important. The transference of pedagogical competence from one agent to another is a part of the process that integrates teachers into their profession. Such initial stages of the process typically involve imitating and testing the prevailing forms of action. Collaboration practices are learned in the context of this process, as are, simultaneously, the language, norms and procedures of the work community, as well. According to recent research, competence cannot be satisfactorily analysed by examining individuals' thinking and knowledge structures only. Instead, it is necessary to analyse also participation in communal action. Expertise involves a process of integration into and participation in one's work culture that entails the assimilation of the practices and norms of the relevant community (Wenger 1998).

## Methods

### **Group interview**

Group interview refers to an occasion where several interviewees are discussing a topic as set up by the researcher. The actual situations can vary to a degree, depending on the number of interviewers and interviewees. In many cases the concept "group discussion" would describe the situation more aptly. Nevertheless, in this study I use the concept "group interview" because it refers to an occasion, which is arranged for research purposes. Group interview has many uses depending on the research subject and phases. A group interview about collaboration practices and their role in one's own work as a teacher can be perceived by the participants also as a form of on-the-job guidance. (Bogdan and Biklen 2003, Morgan 1997.)

The members of an interview group are often from the same work community, and the method is used widely in the development of work communities. In such contexts it has a special function as an action-research technique. A group interview typically focuses on issues that the interviewees have in common. Becoming aware of these shared issues, bringing them into consciousness and making sense of them, is often easier in a group where the members help each other talk about, compare and conceptualise their experiences. Also listening to other people often helps articulate one's own opinions and experiences. In a safe atmosphere and before an empathetic audience with similar interests and experiences people feel comfortable with discussing their own work, for example. Hence, shared experiences or, for instance, belonging to a common subculture are an important precondition of a

successful group interview.

The empirical research consists of two phases: In autumn 2003, data were gathered by videotaping five group interviews of 3-4 people each. The interviewees came from different polytechnics. At the second stage in 2005, data have been collected from one polytechnic unit by means of personal interviews and official documents. The analysis of the data gathered on the second round is still underway.

I divided the discussion themes concerning co-operation into the respective categories of context, content, form, and interests. Since teachers' mutual co-operation is such a complex phenomenon, I did not want to restrict the theme area too much for the interview. Therefore the interview outline was basically a checklist on issues considered important in advance, drawing largely on various studies concerning teachers. Most of the previous studies on teachers' co-operation have been focused on teachers in schools of general education (Huusko 1999, Kärkkäinen 1999, Sahlberg 1996, Willman 2001, Vulkko 2001). In the vocational sector corresponding studies have been carried out by Jaatinen (1999) on organisational culture, Peltokallio (2000) on teacher experiences, Mäntylä (2002) on teamwork, Salo (2002) on school as a micropolitical organisation, and Herranen (2003) on polytechnics as a discourse setting.

### **Subjects and procedures**

The group interviews conducted in the first round of data gathering helped define more precisely the research questions concerning teacher collaboration. Apart from being appropriate for the current stage of the research, group interviewing has also the technical advantage of dealing with several people during a single session. On the other hand, the bigger the group grows, the more difficult the practical arrangements become as regards timetables, for instance.

In this study, the subjects were polytechnic teachers from different work communities. A common feature was that they all worked in the same type of school. Moreover, they were interviewed at a time when they were taking part in the same pedagogical training programme, being thus acquainted with each other. It was probably easier to motivate them to take part in a group discussion than in an individual interview because in a group they were able to listen actively, compare experiences, gain fresh insights, discover links between things and even solve some problems.

The interviewees (17 in all) worked as full-time teachers in polytechnics in different parts of Finland. The data were gathered by videotaping five group interviews with three or four people each. I told the interviewees the theme (teacher collaboration) and expected duration (2 hrs) in advance when calling on the meetings. No particular preparation from their side was required. The predefined themes were useful in directing the course of discussion and allowed me to intervene where necessary.

## Results

The analysis of the data concentrated, firstly, on factual information, i.e. on the work community and developments the interviewees were talking about. Secondly, attention was paid to the conceptual structures by means of which these polytechnic teachers outlined their social reality especially in relation to their colleagues (Alasuutari 1994, 95, Sulkunen 1990, 265). The material was transcribed verbatim, yielding a total of 148 sheets. The analysis started by reading through the interviews and correcting any transcription errors and unclear points. The videotape helped in this checking task, but was not otherwise under analysis as such.

In the first phase of my analyses I constructed a mind- map

on each of the five interviews and respective issues. This description was divided into three themes:

1) *A polytechnic as a workplace*, which highlighted the notion that working in polytechnics involves an encounter between the respective cultures of teaching and administration, 2) *the nature of teachers' work*, where independence was emphasised, and 3) *collegial collaboration*, which included formal and informal dimensions. In the second phase I analysed the data within the micropolitical framework, which refers to power and control in teachers' work (Ball 1987, Blase 1991, Salo 2002). This micropolitical point of view led me to interpret the interview themes by means of the arena model introduced below (see Salo 2002, 42).

Teacher's work is seen as taking place in three arenas: teaching, administration, and interaction. Different arenas require different forms of participation and different competencies having to do with negotiation, privacy protection, learning the procedures etc. A loose linkage between these arenas seems to give some leeway. I analysed teachers' talk for manifestations of these arenas and their interplay. Figure 1 illustrates teachers' talk about the different dimensions and nature of their work.

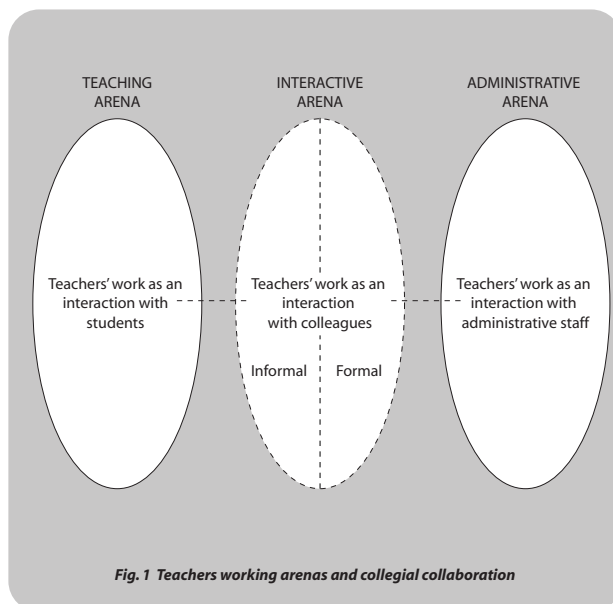


Fig. 1 Teachers working arenas and collegial collaboration

In the teaching arena teachers' work seems to be essentially independent, which they found as one of the best qualities in their work. Power over one's own work contents and methods signifies an autonomous teaching culture, but it also means loneliness especially when it comes to a new teacher. New teachers were even surprised by the degree of loneliness they experienced in their work. Teachers' work was also characterised by increasing workload due to various development efforts that come on top of the teaching work. Interaction with students was considered an essential and rewarding part of work. It calls for a kind of "here-and-now" orientation, which refers especially to short-term planning and coping with daily work.

Teachers also talked about the need to know the organisation and to use a lingo understood by administrative staff. This refers to the administrative arena, which is more distant from the core of teaching; it was discussed as the "second" level of a teacher's work, where the focus is on reacting to the initiatives and policy definitions of the administration. From the teachers' perspective, it is a peripheral field of action with indirect influence on their everyday activities. The influence of the administrative arena permeates teachers' work through strategic planning, action plans, curricular design, and quality systems. Teachers described this domain as bureaucracy that

has little or no connection to their everyday work.

The interaction arena is based on a common idea about the goals of the activities. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning of a work involves participation in the work culture so that one learns to see his or her own action as part of the whole. Competence shows in the ease of shared activities as well as in coherent interpretations. The interaction arena can also be seen, like Orton and Weick (1990) suggest, as a loose coupling or encounter between the administrative and teaching culture. It serves as a buffer zone between the administration and the teachers, reflecting the loose relationship between these domains. The interaction arena thus combines, on the one hand, a spontaneous and situational need – arising from a teacher's work orientation – for informal collaboration and management in everyday professional life and, on the other hand, efforts stemming from administrative objectives to organise evaluate and anticipate the teacher's work in a longer term. The informal collaboration taking place around the teaching arena is grounded on the teachers' mastery and successful performance of their own basic tasks. In the group studied, teachers' work orientation was dominated by thinking in terms of here and now, with collaboration arising without preliminary arrangements and in accordance with each teacher's particular needs. Formal collaboration related more closely to the administrative arena involving official and formal decision-making on schedules and issues that are more distant from the classroom. It was often organised separately as special meetings, and these meetings were considered important especially as channels for the general flow of information. Teachers' everyday life was dominated by the teaching arena, which was only loosely linked with the shared decision-making and management activities going on in the administrative arena. Interaction between the teaching arena and the administrative arena seems to form an important factor in the development of a work community's collaboration culture.

## Discussion

### Teachers' private and common space

Teachers cannot manage their work relying solely on their professional skills and independent decisions, since there are also other factors that determine the time and space available to a teacher, such as the structures of the work community, division of labour, legislation, norms, and shared instruments (e.g. curricula) needed in the work. In strategic considerations and instructional planning, for example, the work is connected with administrative rules and regulations that limit the teachers' autonomy of defining the time and space of their work. In fact, in terms of schedules and division of labour, teaching work seems highly regulated. Various work groups and staff meetings with related duties diminish the impression of a teacher's own space. On the other hand, this impression is strengthened by the fact that administration is, after all, a marginal field in relation to the core of school work, i.e. teaching and instruction. This was reflected in the teachers' talk about administrative assignments, as well, which were considered somewhat distant and additional to their actual work and causing even some friction at times.

Despite the apparent external control, teachers' work culture is still founded on independence. Teachers are given plenty of space in school organisations and their work still seems to be private territory, which shows in teachers' mutual loyalty and respect for their colleagues' work. For this reason, also joint formal decision-making and management have a rather loose connection with a teacher's decisions. In contrast, more informal collegial collaboration offers everyday problem-

solving and support in coping with the work. At the same time such collaboration poses a dual challenge concerning co-operation and interaction skills, on the one hand, and collective professional management and development on the other hand. In a teacher's work these two aspects are intertwined and even interdependent. In order to learn real co-operation skills in a genuine work environment, teachers need to define a shared target and objective for their efforts. Discussion about shared objectives and joint planning in general help the participants understand each other's way of interpreting and teaching things.

### **Collaboration – a new form of the teaching profession?**

A vocational teacher represents two professions. The educational career of a polytechnic teacher consists not only of university studies at the Master's level or higher but also of pedagogical training (possibly on the job) and several years of practice in the professional field. The decision of becoming a teacher is often made quite late along the path, when one's interests in the professional field expand to teaching. Anyhow, such a teacher identity includes a combination of expertise in two fields. At the initial stage of a teacher career, in particular, there may be uncertainty about one's pedagogical skills, which can be compensated by professional expertise, however. The position as an expert of the specific professional field may also increase the new teacher's distance with relation to the colleagues of other fields, especially. Even without this field-specific differentiation teachers have been found to respect their colleagues' professional privacy even to the extent that avoidance of getting involved with other people's work has become an important norm in this profession (Huusko 1999, 206). This makes things easier in the daily practice but does not advance such collegial approaches where different views and practices could enrich each other.

Within an expert culture, teacher's independence is usually appreciated as a characteristic of professionalism. In teachers' work this may lead to overemphasised individualism, which means that collaboration becomes an option only when the individual resources do not suffice. Teachers' competence and its development have been studied in the field of expertise research in terms of knowledge acquisition, participation in the professional culture, and also as a process of knowledge construction, which combines these two aspects (Tynjälä 2004). Co-operation skills are always connected with an individual's accustomed practices and other competencies, but when school is examined as an expert organisation, the demand of communality in development efforts go beyond that. It is not just a matter of increasing expectations for an individual expert's skills but rather concerns a historically more advanced way of working where people have to define together the targets, objectives, and methods for their efforts.

### **Teachership in terms of interaction**

The expansion of expected teacher qualifications from pedagogic and didactic skills towards collaboration and networking is a fact the significance of which to teachers' professional culture is not yet fully understood. The demands for change have arisen largely from the fact that school has become a service institution. Especially with regard to the new polytechnics this refers to a practical approach and serving the needs of workplaces, which idea nobody within or outside the polytechnics is questioning as a goal, at least.

According to Tiilikkala (2004, 241), vocational teachership emphasises interaction, in particular, including multilateral co-operation and networking, even at the expense of teaching. A teacher's work gets easily filled with experiments and projects, so that the actual teaching work seems secondary. The current regional development mission seeks to change the teacher's

role into a multiskilled working life expert. This may partly obscure teachers' relation to their basic task, i.e. preparing new experts. Polytechnics are still searching their role and identity within the education system, and the education units have to develop a new operation culture, which poses a shared content-wise challenge. The task is not easy, bearing in mind that many polytechnics are composed of diverse teacher and teaching cultures, which may be highly different for different fields even within the same school (Herranen 2003; Jaatinen 1999). Collegial collaboration is largely attributable to the space and resources teachers have for co-operation. In this respect, the operation environment may make a great difference.

Now that the latest educational reform has been accomplished, general interest within polytechnics is geared towards the development of contents and pedagogy. The key areas in this development are the active learner and practical co-operation with the representatives of working life. Along with these weightings also collegial collaboration is gaining significance. The arena model described above reveals that one of the main challenges has to do with establishing such an interaction arena where multiprofessionalism supports shared expertise, not individualism and struggling on one's own. Indeed, a central dimension of teachership relates to the development of a collaborative culture, which can be achieved through a professional dialogue.

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