Moving teacher learning from the margins to the mainstream

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What images come to mind when you think about in-service teacher learning? If you imagine a continuing professional development workshop, attended by teachers, facilitated by an outside expert, about the latest teaching policy or practice – then your thinking is safely in the mainstream of practice in the field. Though this mainstream practice has been widely criticized (TNTP, 2015), and its effectiveness questioned (Yoon et al., 2007), it remains the most common way of thinking about and enacting in-service teacher professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

On the margins of these formal professional learning activities, teachers learn informally through routine work activities: experimenting in their classrooms, interacting with colleagues, and joint planning and problem-solving (Horn, 2005). In this article, I discuss one way in which we are trying to cultivate these informal learning processes, thereby moving informal, on-the-job teacher learning from the margins to the mainstream of our thinking.

Our program, which we are developing in partnership with the Israeli Ministry of Education, aims to develop teacher professional learning, collaboration and leadership. We are working with two districts to train teacher leaders, principals and coaches to document lessons and teacher work-group meetings, develop tools for teacher professional learning based on these lessons and meetings, and research this process. An example will help to make this more concrete.

An unexpected lesson in persuasive writing

My example begins in a fifth grade Hebrew language lesson. The teacher sought to teach how to write well-developed arguments in persuasive texts. To demonstrate the importance of good argumentative writing, she prepared two texts in which a boy attempted to persuade his mother to let him join a football club. In one text, the boy presented the many physical, cognitive and social advantages of football, and even discussed research about how important it is to get children away from the television and computer. In the second text, the fictional author begged his mother to let him join the club, because he really, really, really wanted to

join and all his friends were going to be there. In the lesson, the teacher staged a role-play activity, with two boys reading the two texts to a third pupil, who played the mother, and who would decide which text is most persuasive.

A sound plan.

However, in teaching it is rare for everything to go according to plan. The pupil who read the well-argued text, stumbled on the text's sophisticated language and complex grammar. The pupil who read the second text gave a magnificent performance, 'Please, mom, please, please, please,' he whined. When girl who played the role of the mother was asked who was more persuasive, she immediately elected the reader of the second text. As the teacher had planned the remainder of the lesson around using the first text as the model, this was not the anticipated outcome.

This is just one example of many occurrences in which teaching doesn't proceed exactly as planned, and teachers must, in the heat of the moment, interpret what is happening and exercise judgement about how to proceed.

The only remarkable aspect of this event was that a researcher was in the room video-recording the lesson, and the teacher noted this moment as one she'd like to discuss with the team of language teachers that meet each week at this school, as part of their participation in our programme. Much can be learned from investigation of this short episode. For example, the episode affords exploration of the relationship between spoken and written language, and about the importance of audience in persuasion. After all, the pupils may have been right, in that the appeal to the mother's emotions, and the grating whine, may actually be more effective in this context than learned arguments about health and fitness. These considerations are generally made at the planning stage. But you can't plan for everything. So, the teachers also discussed the advantages and disadvantages of different courses of action.

After the teachers in the school language team discussed the episode, the teacher in the recording granted permission for the episode to be disseminated more widely. We developed an activity based on the episode, which was subsequently used in a training day for District supervisors. We further improved the activity, which we published alongside

other classroom examples, in a handbook for leading teachers and coaches.

Developing adaptive expertise

I'd like to now zoom out and situate this one example within the broader story of what we're doing and why.

The basic assumption guiding our work is that teaching is a complex and uncertain practice: complex because of the need to manage conflicting goals and demands, and uncertain because it involves interaction with students, who thankfully have minds of their own (Labaree, 2000). Confronting this complexity and uncertainty requires that teachers develop adaptive expertise, including the capacity to respond effectively to non-routine teaching situations. Such expertise involves noticing and making sense of unanticipated events, being able to draw upon a broad repertoire of teaching strategies, and exercising professional judgement to decide how best to respond (Lefstein & Snell, 2014).

One promising way to support the development of these faculties is through critical discussion of problems of practice, or to engage in what we call 'pedagogically productive talk'. This is teacher collaborative discourse that

- is focused on problems of practice, where teachers discuss issues and concerns that have arisen in their classrooms;
- is anchored in rich representations of practice, such as samples of student work or video clips of classroom practice;
- is multi voiced, where different perspectives are presented and attended to;
- involves pedagogical reasoning including the use of evidence, explanations, and reasons, to interpret classroom events and weigh and justify courses of action;
- involves generative orientations toward students, learning, content and teaching, such as talk that frames students as capable and well-meaning;
- balances support and critique by fostering trust and collegiality on the one hand, and critical inquiry on the other.

In other professions, such as medicine, productive deliberation is a routine component of professional work. In clinical rounds a group of physicians share patient files, considering and critiquing possible diagnoses and treatments.

Confronting the challenges of developing productive pedagogical discourse

Teachers face a number of challenges in conducting productive discussions about problems of practice. I'm going to discuss five of them, and how we're trying to address them:

Grand rounds
Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine (public domain).
Available at http://resource.nlm.nih.gov/101415995

First is the challenge of representation. Unlike the doctors who discuss the patient at his or her bedside, teachers teach behind closed doors, and the act of teaching is fleeting. Discussions of teaching therefore often lack a common object that can be investigated in detail. We seek to address this challenge through documenting what happens in the classroom, both through video and other means (such as collecting student work), and feeding these materials back to the participating teachers. We also collaborate with the leading teachers and coaches to develop their capacity to produce such representations themselves.

Second is the organisational challenge of making time to meet. In Israel, though teachers' contracts allow for time to meet and plan, in most schools this time is rarely devoted to discussions of teaching and learning. As a condition of participation, we require schools to schedule weekly 90-minute team meetings into their timetable, and we work with school principals on how to protect and sustain this arrangement.

Third is the cultural challenge of encouraging teachers to openly discuss their practice, share their problems and engage in critical, constructive discussions. Numerous researchers have documented the norms of privacy and individualism that get in the way of conducting such discussions (Little, 1990).

The fourth challenge is that the skills necessary to be an excellent leader of teacher teams are not necessarily the same as those required to excel in the classroom. Israel currently has no course or degree programme that trains teacher team coordinators. We have addressed these challenges of school culture and teacher leadership, through the adaptation and development of protocols to support teacher talk about practice (McDonald et al.,2003). Through an intensive teacher leadership course and on-site coaching, we practice using the protocols

and discuss issues arising from their enactment in school. During the course and coaching sessions, we model the processes that we expect the leading teachers to enact with their teams. We also record team and course meetings and use the recordings as the basis for critical discussions of the problems of teacher leadership practice.

The fifth and final challenge is that of scale. We know how to support a dozen schools, but how can we replicate this work in the many hundreds of schools in each District? We are addressing this challenge through close partnerships with District supervisors and coaches, who collaborate with us in the development and training processes, and are gradually taking over the work from us.

This work is still on-going, and we have yet to overcome the challenges enumerated here. On the contrary, we have accumulated many more challenges, including issues associated with the difficulties of cultural change, agency and appropriation, system instability, quality control at large-scale, and more. Nevertheless, we remain convinced that deep and long-term professional learning will benefit from dissolving the barriers between learning and work, by moving informal teacher learning processes into the mainstream.

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