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Do Professional Learning Communities reify or interrupt the language of pedagogical practice?

Summary

In Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) teachers discuss observed classroom practice with the intention of improving it. The research reported in this paper considers how these discussions either reify or interrupt (Little 2003) teachers' language of practice. Reification will tend to constrain learning within existing ways of linguistically construing sense. Disruption might establish a new discourse for practice that will enable learning. The data is transcriptions of PLCs from two schools in Scotland.

Keywords: Professional Learning Communities, reification, discourse, teacher community

Introduction

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are groups of teachers who come together in schools to use data about students' performance to try to improve the school's teaching, learning and educational outcomes. While "there is no universal definition of a professional learning community" (Stoll et al. 2006: 222), Dufour (2004) offers three 'big ideas' that he believes clarifies the nature and practice of PLCs. For Dufour PLCs are characterised by:

1. Ensuring that students learn; with a shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning.
2. A culture of collaboration; "a systematic process in which teachers work together to improve their classroom practice" (ibid: 9).
3. A focus on results through the analysis of student performance data.

Stoll et al. (2006: 222) similarly suggest five key characteristics that define PLCs:

1. Shared values and vision.
2. Collective responsibility.
3. Reflective professional inquiry.
4. Collaboration.
5. Group as well as individual learning is promoted.

At the same time as the idea and practices of PLCs have developed, there has been a parallel development of 'Rounds' approaches to teachers' learning. Rounds (City et al. 2009; Del Prete 2013) is a form of collaborative professional development in which educators come together to observe teaching and learning across a number of classrooms in a school. In a post-observation debrief they use notes and other forms of recording, such as

diagrams, to build up a detailed, descriptive, evidence-based picture of teaching and learning in the school. This is used to develop understanding of the teaching and learning practice in the school and decide what needs to be done to develop that practice.

Despite their apparently separate literature and genesis, rounds share their main defining features with PLCs. They:

- Focus on student learning (rather than just on teachers' teaching).
- Are concerned with the generation and analysis of data about learning.
- Promote systematic collaboration.
- Seek to promote shared culture and knowledge.
- Are concerned with group or systemic learning not just individual learning.

Because of these strong similarities, and the relatively loosely defined nature of PLCs, it is reasonable to view rounds as a particular approach to creating PLCs. In this paper, the term PLCs will be used generically to include Rounds.

Despite much academic literature extolling the benefits of PLCs there is currently little detailed empirical evidence of what actually happens within professional learning communities (Meirink et al. 2007; Riveros et al 2012). Similarly there is very little empirical observational data on what happens within Rounds despite a significant growth in their popularity as a practice in schools. This state of affairs seems to continue one identified by Little (2003: 913) when she observed that "Relatively little research examines the specific interactions and dynamics by which professional community constitutes a resource for teacher learning and innovations in teaching practice. In particular few studies go "inside teacher community". As Kruse et al (1995: 30) identify "Growth of the school-based professional community is marked by conversations that hold practice, pedagogy and student learning under scrutiny". However, little detailed examination of these conversations has taken place. To explore the extent to which they are a resource for professional learning.

Theoretical frame

This paper draws on Little's work (Little, 2003; Horn, Little 2010) to contribute to the still relatively small literature that goes inside teacher community by focusing on the ways that language use in PLC discussions in Scotland (based on a Rounds model of PLC) either enables or limits teachers' professional learning.

The analysis in this paper focuses on two aspects of teachers' language use by asking (after Little 2003):

- What facets of classroom practice are made visible in out-of-classroom talk and with what degree of transparency?
- How does conversational interaction open up or close down teachers' opportunity to learn?

Little (2003: 920) defines transparency as "the degree of specificity, completeness, depth and nuance of practice apparent in the talk" (2003: 920). In relation to interaction, Horn and Little (2010: 181) argue that "characteristic conversational routines provided

different resources ... to access, conceptualize and learn from problems of practice". Conversational routines are defined as "patterned and recurrent ways that conversations unfold within a social group ... [they are] constituted by moves, turns of talk that shape the interactions progress by setting up and constraining the response of subsequent speakers" (ibid: 184).

Little argues that focusing on the language through which teachers talk about classroom practice "focuses attention on the system of categories and classifications by which members of a community organize and communicate practice" (Little 2003: 918). In this respect it is important to note that "Classification schemes operate in part to render the ambiguities of the world as if they possessed the clarity of social facts" (ibid: 918) and that "Because they are inevitably ... historical, political, moral, and cultural constructions and because they tend to form a taken-for-granted, invisible infrastructure of working practice, classifications supply both resources and impediments to learning and change" (ibid: 918).

The title of this paper borrows from Little's (2003: 939) contention that linguistic representations of practice can either "reify or interrupt the language of practice". Reification is the process of reasserting the current historical, political and cultural system of categories and classifications so that they become increasingly taken for granted as objective or common sense facts. Interruption is a process of calling into question the current historical, political and cultural system of categories and classifications. Interruption can allow for "[re]-Defining, elaborating and reconceptualizing the problems that teachers encountered and for exposing or building principles of practice" (Horn, Little 2010: 190).

Data gathering and method

Scottish educational context

Each of the four jurisdictions that make up the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) has a separate school system. Scotland has a single curriculum that applies to all children 3–18 called Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). CfE gives enough freedom to schools to make detailed decisions about exactly how it is implemented. This latitude for schools has led to increased emphasis on high quality professional development for teachers (Scottish Government 2010a). The establishment of Learning Rounds in schools, drawing on the development of Instructional Rounds in the USA (City et al. 2009; Roberts 2012), has been seen as an important part of this (Scottish Government 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2013; National CPD Team 2011; Education Scotland 2011).

There is a single form of non-selective school organisation within publicly funded schools in Scotland. Schools are managed through thirty two municipal authorities, known as local authorities (LAs). The OECD (2007, 2015) judges that Scottish education is, internationally, comparatively highly achieving and inclusive, and quality between schools is comparatively consistent. However there are continuing concerns about differences in achievement within schools based on students' socio-economic background.

Data

The data in this paper are extracts from Learning Rounds post-observation debrief discussions that were audio recorded and then transcribed. Each of these meetings was about an hour long. The transcripts were analysed in relation to:

- What facets of classroom practice are made visible in out-of-classroom talk and with what degree of transparency?
- How does conversational interaction open up or close down teachers' opportunity to learn?

Table 1. Schools and participants represented in the data

Type of school	Experience with learning rounds	Preparation for Learning Rounds	Nature of participants	Coding in transcript	Focus of learning round observation
School A: primary school	None	Guidance from national CPD coordinator; information accessed on Education Scotland website	Teachers including Head Teacher plus 3 Local Authority representatives	AA-Depute Head Teacher (facilitator); AB- Head Teacher; AC-class teacher; AD-LA representative; AE- LA representative; AF-LA representative; AG-class teacher; AH-class teacher Transcript line numbers 1–370	Pupils' awareness of learning intentions and success criteria; differentiation; challenge and pace; independent learning
School B: secondary school with feeder primary school	Second time	Guidance from national CPD coordinator	Teachers including CPD co-ordinator	BA-teacher (facilitator) BB-teacher BC-teacher BD-teacher BE-teacher BF-teacher Transcript line numbers 1–312	Learning intentions Plenaries Formative assessment
School C: community secondary school	Third or fourth time for different participants	Some support at Local Authority level	Teachers including CPD co-ordinator	CA-teacher (facilitator) CB-teacher CC-teacher CD-teacher CE-teacher Transcript line numbers 1–312	Learning intentions Target setting Opportunity to work at increased pace Questioning

Type of school	Experience with learning rounds	Preparation for Learning Rounds	Nature of participants	Coding in transcript	Focus of learning round observation
School D: community campus School (nursery, primary, secondary)	Fourth time	Visit to another school in another Local Authority that had experience	Teachers including CPD co-ordinator	DA-teacher (facilitator) DB-teacher DC-teacher DD-teacher DE-teacher DF-teacher DJ-teacher Transcript line numbers 1–285	Development of skills Pupil participation Questioning Behaviour management Group work Use of ICT Active learning Challenge and extension/ differentiation Uniform Use of learning intentions

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. They were chosen as a convenience sample (Walliman, Buckler 2008), because they were conducting Learning Rounds when we wanted to gather the data, and a purposive sample (Jupp 2006) because they represented four local authorities and were more likely to present a wider picture of practice than might have been found in a single Local Authority. Only two of the schools' transcripts are used in this paper. The other are considered in Philpott and Oates (2015).

School A serves a mixed socio-economic area. The teachers are mostly of mid-range experience with some less experienced. None had any previous experience of Learning Rounds. Learning Rounds was promoted in the school by the Local Authority for school improvement after an unfavourable school inspection. The Depute Head Teacher organised the Learning Round.

School B was in a mid-sized town in a rural area. There was no significant deprivation in the area. The teachers were early career. They had previous experience of Learning Rounds, which was promoted in the school by a Principal Teacher (teacher responsible for leading a subject area).

School C was a new, large school in a large new town. The teachers were mostly early stage teachers who had previously arranged Learning Rounds themselves. It had been driven in the school by a young Principal Teacher.

School D was a new school in a small town in a rural, affluent area. The teachers were a mixture of experienced staff and novice staff. Many had previous experience of Learning Rounds. The lead responsible member of staff was a Principal Teacher.

Findings

Analysis of the transcripts suggests a number of ways that out of classroom representations of classroom practice and conversational routines tend to reification rather than interruption of the existing language of pedagogical practice. These are:

- A focus in representations on teacher behaviour rather than the effects of teacher behaviour on pupil behaviour.
- Representations in “molar units” rather than “molecular” descriptions of what is happening. Molar units are large units of behaviour, for example peer assessment, formative assessment. Molecular descriptions would analyse these into component parts.
- Conversational routines that make initial broad (or molar) categories and classifications increasingly broad.
- The dominance of the pedagogical discourse (and, therefore, categories and classifications) of official policy.

A focus in representations on teacher behaviour

The extract below of an interaction between teachers BA and BB from school B shows that a focus on representing teachers’ use of strategies rather than on what pupils are doing makes it difficult to judge if pupils are being challenged, whereas a focus on pupils would yield evidence for this. This focus fails to represent aspects of practice in the classroom (i.e. pupil behaviours) that would have allowed consideration of whether established practice was having a beneficial effect. So a chance for “exposing or building principles of practice” (Horn, Little 2010: 190) has been lost.

BA: ... in few lessons there was challenge to SC [success criteria], so the SC wasn’t really a challenge like eh... one of the teachers uses a problem, so the SC is being able to solve this problem by the end of the lesson, so it’s a challenge. Do we want to say something about that or do we leave it?

BB: It’s one of the hard ones because we didn’t know the kids so it was hard to say if they were being challenged in that lesson because it wasn’t obvious.

Line 301–306

Representations in molar units rather than molecular details and conversational routines that make categories and classifications increasingly broad

The sequence below from School D shows a tendency widespread in the data to represent pedagogical practice in molar units, in this case “challenge” and “extension”. These initial

molar units are then made progressively broader through the conversational interactions between participants. The first move in the progressive broadening shown below is to fuse the two categories. The second is to apply the new composite category to an increasing range of pedagogical practices. By the end of the extract, almost anything can count as challenge, extension and differentiation.

DC: We said that we saw plenty of challenge and extension for the pupils in most class.

DB: We had that in some.

DA: What did the other groups think?

DD: we had that for some... differentiation.

DA: shall we say in some classes we saw challenge and extension? Is differentiation not different from challenge and extension?

DD: We I think differentiation and extension are the same thing, just opposite ends of the scale or extension is differentiation.

DH: meeting their needs.

DB: Differentiation appropriate to the learning?

DD: But again you have to be careful not to put it in a negative way not to ... it wasn't that they you can't say that some ...classes at the beginning weren't into it wasn't that they weren't challenging them challenging them they were just setting the scene.

DB: but this is just like a snapshot.

DA: So maybe what we should be saying is in... most or all challenge and extension, differentiation where needed?

DA: Could we take out the differentiation part and say in most classes we saw differentiation by outcome?

DG: I think if I was ... some classes where a whole class approach to things at which point if all the class is on the same task then you've still got the challenge in that task with a varied outcome, it can be differentiated by outcome which we saw in the whole class approach, the differentiation was there even if it wasn't different pupils doing different activities in different task it was differentiation by outcome so I would have said I saw differentiation in most classes.

This process of representation in initial molar categories and then progressive broadening can also be seen in the extract below from school B where the discussion is about the molar unit of formative assessment.

BC: I think in every lesson there was (at least one type of that) one, at least some form of.

BA: Shall we put in every lesson and make a comment about in every lesson and then maybe make a more refined statement after that?

BC: Do we need to make a more refined statement?

BE: Was it every single lesson? I just wonder if it's most or every.

BC: If you take like peer, self, formative.

BA: I don't think there wasn't a lesson where pupils weren't assessing where they were at or teachers assessing C: you see I don't think I did either) I think in every one I saw it.

BD: It's hard to say if the teacher is assessing discretely or not sometimes to us it maybe looked like there wasn't any form of assessment, just doing the task and.

BB: I suppose and are you thinking about our last one? Just a few actually.

BE: Cause I suppose like CDT on the computers, although he never actually said anything but he'd go round an look and see everything was alright.

BD: There was questioning so I supposed he done it thru questioning.

BA: So do you want to say in all lessons assessment of learning intentions or something? (Don't know) cos we only have a short period of time so we're almost finished our checklist.

BB: Well if you don't feel we've seen it in every lesson we can't say every lesson.

BA: No we can't – do we say most then? (It would have to be _ agreement).

BB: I think that's fair because if you didn't see it you didn't see it so.

BE: Sometimes when I think about it there was questioning and that was formative assessment so ... you don't want it to be that you're presuming it has to be obvious.

BA: So shall I say in most lessons (some form of assessment took place whether it be peer self or teacher) so in most lessons some form of assessment took place – whether it be peer led, self-assessment teacher led or how pupils were performing? ...

Lines 204–227

In this extract, what counts as evidence of formative assessment is progressively broadened so that it can be said to have been seen frequently. It even begins to be applied to cases where nothing explicit was seen as in the contributions from teacher BE in the extract: “Cause I suppose like CDT on the computers, although he never actually said anything but he’d go round an look and see everything was alright” and “you don’t want it to be that you’re presuming it has to be obvious”.

For the most part the transcripts from schools B and D show that discussions represent what happens in classrooms in molar units rather than fine grained molecular descriptions of the specific actions of teachers and learners and the link between them. This means that the classroom practice is talked about in terms of pupils and teachers engaging in, for example, peer assessment or self-assessment. There is very little record of what molecular actions teachers performed and the specific effects these had on pupil activity. This is exacerbated by the tendency of participants in Schools B and D to create ever more encompassing categories for these activities. This increasing lack of transparency means that the participants lost the chance to consider how different specific ways of implementing the general category of peer assessment or self-assessment, for example, affected what pupils did and what they learned. This might have been revealed by more molecular descriptions. This is also meant that representations of classroom practice played little part in challenging what was already regarded as good practice by looking at the actual effects it had on what pupils were doing. What was lost was an opportunity for “elaborating and reconceptualizing the problems that teachers encountered and for exposing or building principles of practice” (Horn, Little 2010: 190).

The dominance of the pedagogical discourse of official policy

The discourse that dominates the discussions in the transcripts is policy discourse or policy discourse mediated through LA or school mandates. This means that the categories and classifications for practice were also those of policy prescriptions. Biesta, Priestley and Robinson (2015) report that Scottish teachers in their research on teacher agency had a very similar set of views about teaching, learning and education, even though they were from diverse locations and sectors. This was the same in the research reported here. Possibly the experience of this research and Biesta, Priestley and Robinson’s (2015) experience 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 et al. 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 (see also Philpott 2014). City et al (2009) suggest the use of external sources of understanding in Instructional Rounds such as academic readings and models and these could provide alternative discursive categories and classifications. 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.

Discussion

Overall the tendency of the discussions in the examples of Learning Rounds in Scotland captured here was to reify existing discourse about pedagogical practice rather than interrupt or challenge it. This means that policy discourse increasingly takes on the guise of unarguable and objectively existing reality with each reiteration. The initial problem seems to be the prevalence of, and lack of alternatives to, policy discourse in the categories and classifications that teachers used to talk about the practice they had observed. This initial reifying use of policy discourse is then maintained by representing practice in molar units rather than molecular actions. As long as a classroom activity is represented as ‘peer assessment’ there is a relatively low degree of transparency about what is actually happening in the classroom in terms of interactions between teacher and pupils, pupils and pupils, and pupils and knowledge/skills. A representation in terms of molecular details of actions would allow questions to be raised about whether what was happening really was peer assessment and also whether peer assessment was actually having a beneficial effect. This reification is also maintained by representations that focus on teacher actions far more frequently than on pupils’ actions.

In addition to problems with the relative lack of transparency of representations, some repeated conversational routines worked against the interruption of the dominant discourse by moving from molar units already lacking in transparency to progressively broader categories. There is some evidence in the transcripts that these conversational routines were caused by concerns about accountability. This can be seen for example in school D where teacher DD says “you have to be careful not to put it in a negative way” (line 83). Education in the United Kingdom, including Scotland, has become progressively subject to a neo-liberal regime of accountability. Although the development of this regime has, so far, been less marked in Scotland than in some other parts of the UK, it is still present. It seems that participants in the Learning Round were concerned that representing pedagogical practice in a way that suggested that some officially recommended pedagogical approaches were not being used, might have undesirable consequences.

Taken together, then, it can be argued that strong accountability regimes can have an adverse effect on the production of representations of classroom practice that are sufficiently transparent to provide affordances for professional learning. The accountability regime here is responsible for both the near exclusive use of policy discourse and the use of molar units and their progressive broadening (and therefore opacity) in representations of practice.

The situation researched here also differs in a significant detail from those researched by Little. In her research, Little (2003: 918) writes about the “insularity of the classroom” and how representations of practice that “arise in out-of-classroom talk [are] discrete, condensed and desituated” (2003: 936). She uses Hutchins’ (1996) idea of the “horizon of observation’ to compare this to the situated learning that Lave and Wenger (1991) explore. In the latter case, Little writes, learners have access to all the details of practice and not just those selected for accounts of practice that “rely heavily on a certain shorthand terminology and on condensed narratives that convey something of the press of classroom life without fully

elaborating its circumstances or dynamics” (2003: 936). The comparison is relevant to Little’s research as she is researching out of classroom representations of classroom practice in situations where teachers have not shared first-hand experience of the classroom events. In the PLCs that I am researching, all the participants observed the events first-hand. However, representations of the experience still tend to “rely heavily on a certain shorthand terminology and on condensed narratives” that all participants seem to accept. This suggests that the challenge of making representations transparent and therefore generative of professional learning (Horn, Little 2010) is greater than Little supposes. Even events that all participants experienced first-hand become codified through the dominant discourse of the school and can become increasingly opaque under the pressure of accountability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems that both the representations of classroom practice and the conversational routines in the PLCs research were not conducive to generating professional learning. In order for these PLCs to function more effectively for developing pedagogical practice, a number of changes might productively be introduced.

Firstly, participants need to move away from the tendency to represent practice in molar units and the focus in a more fine grained and molecular way on the smaller units of behaviour that make up these molar units and their interrelationships.

Secondly, these representations also need to move away from focusing mostly on teacher behaviours and need to include more representation of pupil behaviours and their connection to those teacher behaviours.

Thirdly, sources of alternative discourses need to be utilized so that practice can be represented in different ways. These discourses could be provided, as City et al. (2009) suggest, by making use of research texts related to the practices being observed.

Finally, PLC participants need to understand the observation and sharing of classroom practice as primarily an opportunity for learning and developing understanding of pedagogy rather than for auditing and accountability. This may only come about if the management culture of schools is changed accordingly.

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