

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

Horizontal collaboration as the new professional development

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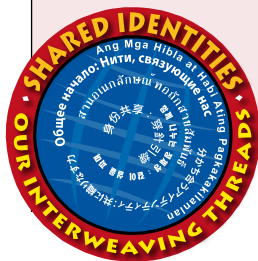
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Collaborating with peers in pursuing professional development can be much more beneficial as a “horizontal” learning environment. Unlike in-service, top-down training programs, educators in collaboration with peers can assist each other by working through their zones of proximal development (ZPD). The authors will advocate that “horizontal collaboration” is the most effective way to pursue professional development. A look at the activity theory will help the reader better understand the benefits of this kind of professional development. The step-by-step process of collaboration will be outlined, including tools for collaboration, ways to begin collaborating, and the roles of the players in the collaborative environment.

専門的能力の開発を仲間と共同作業する事は、『ホリゾンタル』の学習環境としてはるかに有益である場合があります。現職のトップダウンのトレーニングプログラムと異なり仲間と協力して研究する教育者は、それらの最近接発達領域(ZPD)を通し互いに支援する事ができます。著者は、「ホリゾンタルコラボレーション」が専門の開発を追求する最も有効な方法であると主張するでしょう。そしてこの活動理論への注視は読者がこの種の専門の開発をする上でよりよく理解する助けとなるでしょう。共同作業の着実なプロセスは、コラボレーションツール、コラボレーションを始める方法および強調環境における各個人の役割を含めて概要されるでしょう。

When teachers look at the words *theory*, *practice* and *research*, and are then asked “Which one doesn’t belong?” they choose “*practice*” as the odd one out. That these three do not go hand in hand is a commonly held belief within the teaching community (van Lier, 1996). Additionally, ongoing professional development is often seen as a top-down process: Teachers attend conferences and seminars to hear the latest theories, and then put them into practice in their classrooms. Yet, actually, teachers



have in their own teaching context all the latest research they need about what happens in the classroom. They just need to utilize that information for their own professional development. This article will examine ways in which teachers can collaborate with each other horizontally (not top-down), and in doing so they can try out their own new theories as the most effective way to develop professionally.

The case study used in this paper demonstrates the collaborative efforts of six Birmingham MA students. They formed a study group called MASH – *Meet, Ask, Share, Help* as part of their efforts to maximize the applications of their MA towards their professional careers. Using this collaborative case study, the Activity Theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Leont'ev, 1978; Engestrom, 1987; Daniels, 2001) will be discussed to show how reflective teaching through collaboration can eventually lead to changes in the classroom as well as changes in the professional identity of the teachers. This supports the argument that this kind of collaboration can assist teachers in applying their collaborated knowledge directly to their professional lives. The “TE” in “TEFL” (teaching English as a foreign language) is effective so long as one understands how to put theory into practice. With the support of others who are in the same stages of professional development, this can have vast implications for the classroom and for one’s own professional development.

Thus the overall goal of this article is to show by way of the Activity Theory that teachers learning with other teachers through their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) can learn to apply theory to practice. Teachers then returning to the collaborative environment can

discuss experiences from the classroom and in doing so they can create new ideas and theory. Thus, a reflective teacher training program through collaboration can be realized. First, we need to look at the MASH group.

MASH

MASH is a group of Birmingham MA students located around Japan. Initially there were four core members in the group and when the concept of MASH was launched, in addition to the core members, over 100 students, alumni, and staff of the Birmingham program joined. The MASH core group met online on a regular basis throughout the MA program to discuss research, theory, and how it affected their classrooms. Presentation events are held throughout Japan a few times a year, to bring students face to face to discuss their current research and ideas and to get feedback from other students. This has always been a horizontal type of feedback, as the students are relying on the collective knowledge of the other students to learn. MASH is currently in its second year. We will proceed by discussing two professional development models.

Models for professional development

Wallace’s reflective practice model (see Figure 1) introduces the concept of professional development through practice and reflection, on the way to reaching a goal of professional competence. Stage 2 in this diagram shows the process of knowledge or theory being put to practice. The “reflective cycle” is the basis for understanding the practice in the classroom and reflecting on what happens there. This enables

teachers to become better educators from evaluating their own practices.

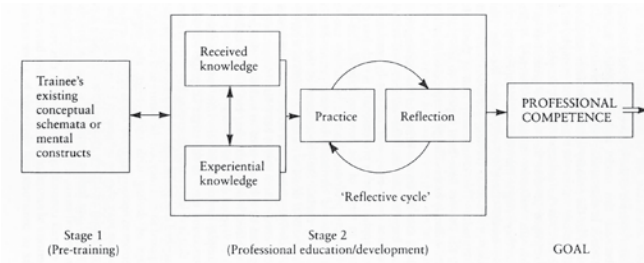


Figure 1. The reflective practice model of professional educational development (Wallace, 1991)

There is no reference to collaboration in Wallace's literature. These authors would argue that collaboration can be much richer than personal reflection and is necessary for comparing, checking, discussing the classroom, and the results of putting theory into practice. Here it is important to recognize that the relationship between theory, research, and practice is an important one. Although practice seems to be the odd one out, teachers (unlike fulltime researchers) have the advantage of doing research in their own classroom based on new theory, first putting it into practice, and then refining it through collaboration with other teachers experiencing the same growth.

Introduction to the Activity Theory model

Activity Theory, as introduced by Leont'ev (1978, cited in Engestrom et al., 1999) is based on the work of Vygotsky (1978). Engestrom's diagram of the Second Generation Activity Theory model will be the basis for the analysis of the MASH Group case study.

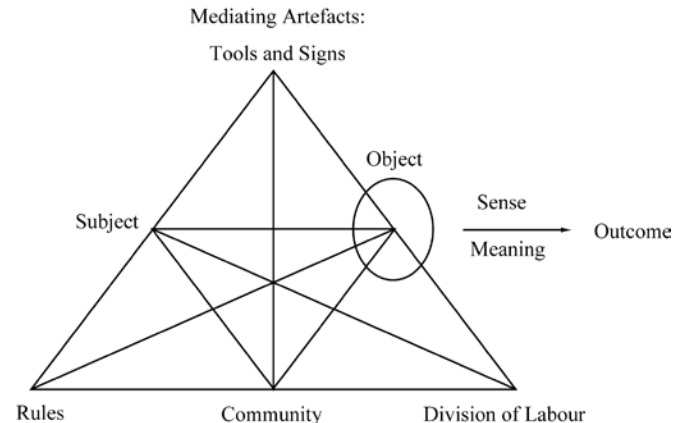


Figure 2. Second Generation Activity Theory model: The structure of a human activity system (Engestrom, 1987, cited in Daniels, 2001)

The Activity Theory was designed to study social interaction. Simply put, it helps to clarify the processes by which we communicate, develop, and interact with each other. Each part of the Activity Theory diagram represents a segment of interaction. For example, we use tools such as

speech or email as a mediating artifact – located at the top of the diagram – and how those tools affect the other areas of interaction are represented by the lines. For example, there may be specific rules (the bottom left of the diagram) to how we use email, or who is included in our community when using email.

One of the key concepts that Vygotsky introduced in the study of social interaction was the ZPD. Vygotsky (1978) described the ZPD as, “The distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86).

Working through the ZPD can also be applied to professional development in a collaborative setting (Wells, personal communication, April 14, 2008). We can tie this concept to the MASH group, keeping in mind that “more capable” can also be interpreted as skills or abilities that we may have when we collaborate: One of us may be more computer literate, another a more prolific writer and, most importantly, shared knowledge becomes key when discussing theory and research. The discussions that result can lead to discovering more potential and will eventually lead to personal growth and professional development. Wells (1999) states that in conditions where no one member of the group has any idea of how to proceed, the most significant understanding and advancements are made. It is not necessarily a more capable “other” that is needed in collaboration, but more importantly, the willingness of all the members to learn with and from each other. This is the key point in the concept of horizontal collaboration. The

formation of the MASH group was an important step in creating this opportunity.

Mediating artifacts (tools)

From the birth of the Web only a little over two decades ago, came tools for communicating over long distances. Skype, iChat, and Google Docs are just a few samples of recent Internet software that have changed the way we interact with others. Many of these tools include add-ons, such as file transfer capabilities, video feed, and PowerPoint theaters. Things have come a long way from telephone conference calling. These tools can be used by anyone with an Internet connection and a computer. Most importantly, though, is the fact that these tools have opened up a whole new world of possibilities for collaboration. Attending seminars or going to a conference may be ideal for interacting with others, but for continued support and continued interaction, these online tools allow teachers to effectively communicate and share information at any time without needing to leave their school or their home.

Tying the Activity Theory to professional development through collaboration

Tharp and Gallimore (1988) state that if teachers are to acquire the ability to assist the performance of their students through their ZPD, then teachers themselves must have their performance assisted by other teachers.

There are mailing lists on the internet readily available for teachers to get ideas and share ideas, yet examining them closely reveals that most are geared towards individual

lesson plans or “how to teach” a concept. Going back to the Activity Theory diagram and examining the “object,” we might think of this object as our lesson plan in this case. A synopsis of the areas of the Activity Theory diagram looks like this:

- Subject: This is the membership, the users of the mailing list interacting with others.
- Community: The other members on the list.
- Tools: The mailing list on the Internet.
- Rules: These are rules of etiquette on the list, e.g. no foul language, etc.
- Division of labor: Those individuals who want to contribute to the list can do so. Others may choose to read only.
- Object: Ideas for the classroom.
- Outcome: This may be a very vibrant list with a lot of great ideas for teaching.

Mailing lists can provide vast amounts of information to their users yet, from the standpoint of professional development, the object of our activity needs to be different. Let’s examine the Activity Theory diagram from this standpoint.

If we suggest that the object of our activity is the application of theory into practice in our classrooms, we can see that the areas of the Activity Theory diagram change to a large extent. In Figure 3., the subject is no longer considered as an individual but instead the community where the teacher works, or in this case, the MASH group. Division

of Labor becomes a key area, as it focuses on the abilities of the individual users and how they contribute to the group through their shared knowledge and shared abilities.

But in identifying that the object of our activity has changed, we need to point out that the object becomes our focus and what motivates us. In our desire to professionally develop with the help of each other, the object is constantly changing. Engestrom points out that:

Activity is achieved through constant negotiation, orchestration, and struggle between different goals and perspectives of its participants. The object and motive of a collective activity are something like a constantly evolving mosaic, a pattern that is never fully completed. (Engestrom, 1999, cited in Daniels, 2001, p. 90)

This constant changing and evolving brings us back to the concept of working through our ZPDs. As we discover new ideas, share different information, take the theory to the classroom, and bring the results back to our MASH group for discussion, the developmental process begins to look much different. As problems are encountered, questions are brought to the table, or as new ideas are introduced to the group, the object of activity shifts to one of development. The horizontal collaboration becomes professional development because we are working on ways to proceed from the ideas presented by those in the group and each step along the way becomes a step in our development. Leont’ev states:

“the main thing which distinguishes one activity from another is the difference of their objects.

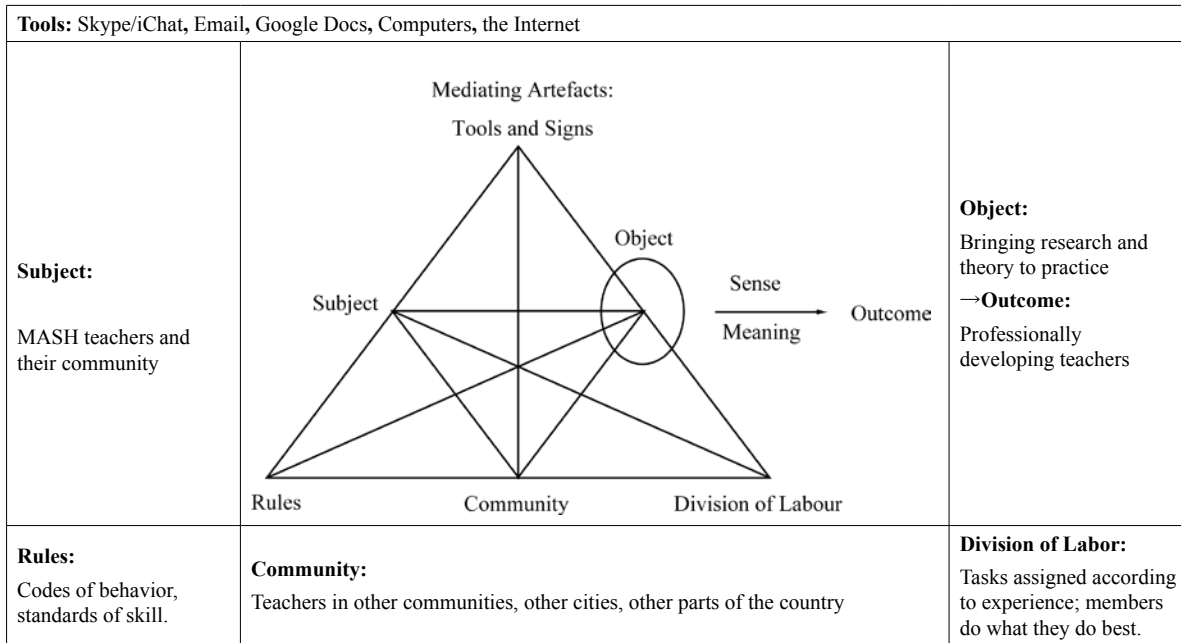


Figure 3. A representation of the Activity Theory and how it applies to the MASH group case study. Adapted from Greenhow and Belbas (2007)

The shifting and developing object of an activity is related to the motive that drives it. Individual (or group) action is driven by a conscious goal. Although actions are aroused by the motive of the activity, they seem directed towards a goal... the one and the same action can serve different activities” (1978, cited in Daniels, 2001, p. 86).

The shift of motivations, as well as the changes of the activity systems, is clearly occurring in the MASH group. Wells states that it is important to realize that constructive discussion with colleagues who share a commitment to learning helps us work through our own ZPD as educators (1999). Daniels, in a recent article, outlines an alternative suggestion to the issue of collaboration mixed with action research in a horizontal boundary crossing. Mutual learning is much more effective when professionals from different backgrounds collaborate (Daniels, 2007).

The link between Wallace (see Figure 1) and Daniels is powerful evidence that reflective teaching can be a process toward becoming a better educator, and the Activity Theory shows that collaboration can only have a positive effect on the overall result. As Wells (1999) points out, similarly to Daniels (2007), the horizontal collaboration that results has an indirect but full impact on the students because the teachers have taken responsibility to establish themselves in their own profession, and by working in collaboration with other teachers, these transformations can happen.

Chang-Wells and Wells state that the emphasis on the growing practice of teacher research is in collaboration with other teachers. This support can often help construct novel solutions that are more appropriate than those recommended

by experts outside of the classroom. This helps teachers transform their own identities as they take responsibility for their own learning and the learning opportunities they bring to the classroom (as cited in Wells, 1999).

Becoming better educators

The practice and reflection cycle in the case of collaboration supported through the Activity Theory is done through a horizontal dimension, thus increasing the power of the reflective cycle. This is accomplished through social interaction with other teachers who help each other through their ZPD on one hand and by doing projects or action research on the other. The combination of those two actions increases the potential for professional competence.

In order for goals to be realized in a collaborative, reflective teacher-training programme, it must be realized that this is an ongoing process and for all intents and purposes, the desired conclusion will never be reached: “In collaborative settings, teachers acquire and develop better skills through their collective analysis, evaluation, and experimentation with new teaching strategies” (Rosenholtz, 1986, cited in Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p. 25).

Implications as teachers – training through our ZPD

Throughout this paper, it has been stressed that professional development is best done in collaboration with other teachers. Rognoff points out that the role of the teacher should not be one of a dispenser of knowledge or someone who merely assigns grades, but as a learner who is committed to the co-construction of knowledge (as cited in Wells, 1999).

Teachers wanting to pursue development or, in this case, MA students wanting to apply new knowledge to the classroom have opportunities to share findings with other teachers. In order for us to strive for excellence in pursuing our MA, it is an ideal opportunity to share with others and learn through our own ZPD. This will certainly help us as students, but also help us excel as educators.

Conclusion

Horizontal collaboration is a powerful concept. The cyclical nature of the collaboration presented here, especially with regard to a program where teachers cannot collaborate so easily due to distance, is both necessary and valuable. The Internet becomes an important tool. Even more so, the software that helps teachers communicate, share documents, and most importantly reflect on their individual professional lives from a distance, has yet to be explored by many teachers. The results that can come out of horizontal collaboration with other teachers, whether they are in similar settings or in entirely different settings, can only be positive, as they fosters professional development. The students benefit, the teachers benefit, and the teaching profession reaches new levels of excellence. The perception is that “teacher development” has meant teacher training, something that is “done to teachers.” Only recently has this begun to give way to a more agentive view of development: teachers learning in their zones of proximal development, constructing their understanding of the art of teaching through reflective practice, and seeking guidance and assistance through collaboration (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988).

Mark de Boer has been teaching in Japan since 1997. He teaches at three universities and owns two successful private language schools. He loves exploring cutting-edge projects through technology such as Second Life online teaching in a professional development through collaboration setting. His research focuses on Vygotsky in the TBL classroom and how social interaction in an “inauthentic” classroom creates the best learning environment for language acquisition.

Steven Herder arrived in Japan in 1989 for a one-year adventure. He has progressively evolved into a professional EFL teacher. He believes that being a teacher means an ongoing commitment to learning. “We have to first connect with our students, and then expect them to grow in some way; the rest we just work out day by day.” He is very interested in extensive writing, extensive reading, and exploring Nation’s four strands approach in the classroom.

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