Compassionate collaboration, choice and creativity: Learning Communities against the grain in hierarchical institutions

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Introduction

This short article accompanies the one by Claire Badger, Miles Golland and Amanda Triccas, also in this edition of *Impact*. These teacher-authors describe the collaborative interaction that is promoted by Teacher Learning Communities and Student Learning Communities in Godolphin and Latymer School. They define this as 'constructing knowledge with others' and they emphasise the power of talking with colleagues face to face at regular intervals of time. They also discuss 'peer learning', in which colleagues support and encourage each other's learning, regardless of their position in the formal school hierarchy. They highlight the importance of Learning Community membership being voluntary rather than coerced; and how each teacher or student exercises agency by determining their own route for change. They tell us that new learning, outside the comfort zone, and creative risk-taking are also essential parts of the process.

These emphases in a thriving school like Godolphin and Latymer are refreshing in the current climate of 'the new authoritarianism' (Giroux, 2007), where some teachers feel undermined and undervalued, managed impersonally at a distance through digital means. As one teacher put it, he felt 'lower than the rubbish collector' whose collection of rubbish at least made a recognised difference. The compassionate collaboration, choice-making and creativity which are provoked by Learning Communities seem to me crucial antidotes to the current tendency for top-down, hierarchical systems of management in some educational institutions. For these, a contrary set of words springs to mind: competition, coercion, conformity and control. In this article, I suggest that Michael Fielding's championing of the *personal* versus the *functional* highlights the role that Learning Communities can play to improve teachers' flourishing in schools and colleges, by providing those spaces where *personal relationships* can thrive alongside *functional* ones. This role can be played out through the insistence in Learning Communities on collaboration rather than competition; choice not coercion; creativity instead of conformity; and compassion rather than control. Fielding proposed:

> … a person-centred alternative that transforms and transcends the hegemony of insistent instrumentalism in favour of an inclusive, creative community as a more fitting aspiration for education in a democratic society (Fielding, 2007, p. 383).

I hope that this article, alongside Claire Badger and colleagues', will refocus attention in teacher development towards important person-centred values in addition to practical skills. Fielding suggested that attention to practical detail needed to serve the greater goals of human fulfilment rather than to obstruct those. He argued that human flourishing was more than efficient organisation and security: it also depended on free and equal personal relationships in creative community. Learning Communities have great potential for enabling such relationships to flourish within the context of effective professional development.

Our research: Learning Communities against the hierarchical backdrop

We worked with seven Senior Teachers of English from six schools in Egypt and interviewed each person intensively. The Senior Teachers' names were Ahlam, Farida, Laila and Samira (women); and Hasan, Saif and Yousry (men). These Senior Teachers had been teaching for many years and took a senior position of monitoring the work of less experienced teachers. In their system, the hierarchy of power and control was particularly rigid. We therefore used our research to investigate the potential for Senior Teachers to engage in compassionate, collaborative and creative interaction despite being in a system that emphasised competition, coercion, conformity and control.

Under my own guidance and that of Egyptian university colleagues, from September 2016 to May 2017, the Senior Teachers met every month as a Learning Community of Senior Teachers to reflect on and express face to face how best to support the professional development of the teachers under their guidance. Each Senior Teacher set up a TLC in their respective school. The Senior Teacher's job in this framework was therefore to encourage junior teachers in their TLC to reflect on their own teaching experiences without feeling judged. Such open relationships were, however, unusual within their system, where seniority was assumed to be the trigger for respect and also the signal, out of politeness, to repress -rather than express - one's own views and feelings. In fact, physical spaces to meet face to face for talk were very hard to find. Comments from interviews with the Senior Teachers are narrated below.

Research findings: shifts in learning and support for *personal relationships* through TLCs

Developing a compassionate, collaborative approach through TLCs

One of the Senior Teachers, Farida, explained how between November and May, her fear had transformed into a sense of powerfulness through the compassionate collaborative interactions she engaged in, in her TLC. She explained:

> I used to be afraid of new ideas. I didn't know how to apply them. Now I can try anything! … Before, I felt I couldn't do it. Then I saw we could do whatever we wanted… I found it simple, not hard.

Another Senior Teacher, Ahlam, explained that initially she struggled to discuss learning and teaching with the more junior teachers in her TLC as she did not respect their authority sufficiently. By the end of the nine month project, however, she told us of the genuine exchange of ideas that had motivated her teachers since TLCs got under way:

> They would come to me and tell me about things they had found, like videos. Our relationship became more about exchanging ideas than in the beginning. In the beginning, it was just work.

Saif talked about the 'family' spirit of the TLCs. It seemed that for Saif this 'family spirit' was inspiring because it contrasted with the impersonal relationships he was used to at work. He said, 'This encouraged us a lot. There wasn't a sense that anyone was inferior'. Hasan had a similar experience:

> The way I deal with the teachers has totally changed. I no longer just give orders. We exchange ideas… In the past, teaching was dictatorial. It wasn't participatory. I was the manager. Now, it's different. I put myself in the teacher's shoes. If I were in

their shoes, what would I do in class? I started to talk to them about this. What do *we* want to do?

This compassionate collaboration had even spilled over into the classroom in the sense that everyone's views became important, including students'. Yousry told us that he had come to see his teaching role not just as teaching young people but as 'forming people' through authentic relationships with them. 'Forming people' did not happen immediately: 'Changing people? We aren't business people. We are forming people. Forming people needs a lot of patience'. Similarly, Senior Teacher Hasan's vision was now to develop 'good members in society' who knew how to deal compassionately with a range of people. Hasan described how 'sitting alone', without face to face interaction, blocked knowledge.

Without exception, the Senior Teacher*s* came to appreciate how much more they could learn while engaging face to face with others than they had assumed. Learning appeared to become a two-way process. For example, through discussion with other teachers about their experiences, Yousry gained inspiration for his own new actions:

> We visit [each other's classes]. We meet. When I think we will meet, I have to think what I will say. This was the push, that someone is following up… These discussions were very useful.

Development of a creative approach through TLCs

All the Senior Teachers described how less experienced teachers in their TLCs helped them to think about their own teaching and to develop it. Ahlam described this as follows:

> Everyone contributed their best, so we could create something great… It's much better than coming up with ten ideas that aren't good… As for the [less experienced] teachers, I now feel there isn't any difference between us. The younger ones used to be afraid to express their ideas.

Similarly, Samira's TLC meetings emerged from being a forum for teachers to receive instructions, into a place for expressing new ideas:

> The TLCs were discussions. We were freer. We talked about things related to what we were doing – new ideas. We made suggestions and changes… We tried to find solutions, not just listening to each other's problems.

One strong message that came through our interviews was the sense of liveliness experienced by participants during TLCs, which became a fertile ground for teachers' curiosity and creativity. Laila, an older teacher, described how this 'spirit' allowed learning to be set in motion. This energy led participants to start trying out new approaches. Participants all commented on how they had previously slipped into boring routines but how TLCs had allowed them to shake these up. In Laila's view:

> Anything that doesn't change will fail. If you don't develop it, it will die. You must innovate in everything or it won't have spirit.

Ahlam, another older participant, described the spirit which came to drive her development:

> I have been teaching for 27 years, but now I feel something new. I want to keep going!

One important discovery for the Senior Teachers was that it was not only the content of what others said which had influence: others' enthusiasm or creativity could provoke innovative thinking too.

Developing willingness to act through making choices in TLCs

> You want me to fulfil my purpose? Don't tell me how I can achieve the purpose! … It shouldn't be imposed on [teachers]. Maybe they don't like the style. They should not be coerced.

This approach, expressed by Saif, was referred to repeatedly by all participants. For example, Yousry noticed the importance of a comfortable relationship between the observed teacher and their observer in the classroom:

> The best thing about peer observation was that we chose who would do the observation. You know this person, so you don't feel the pressure.

Overall, the Senior Teachers clearly saw that when learners, whether teachers or pupils, perceived their own learning as 'personally meaningful' (Rogers, 1951, p.427) they made more effort to progress. Saif, for example, could obviously see that coercion by those in superior positions blocked development, and this view was reinforced in his TLC:

> The best thing [about the TLC] was that you didn't force anyone to participate. If I was forced to join, I wouldn't participate well. When you feel you are there by choice, this makes you want to try.

Ahlam described how her TLC teachers actually *desired* to try out new ideas because they had come up with the ideas themselves. She explained that when teachers tried out one of their own ideas and it worked, this in turn made them 'trust themselves more' and thereby take more risks. She commented: 'Success is a great feeling… This feeling is powerful'.

Discussion: flourishing against the grain

The Senior Teachers' sense of improved self-worth through personal relationship with trusted others in a community sparked off a virtuous cycle of compassionate collaboration and creativity that in turn led to further learning and development. They all described a shift in how they perceived themselves professionally, from an undervalued teacher who lacked power and authority, to a professional who could make a significant difference to teaching and learning in their school and could also collaborate – face to face - with others to do the same.

The aspects of the TLCs that Senior Teachers pinpointed as most transformational were those Michael Fielding refers to as the *personal* in contrast to the *functional.* Free and equal personal relationships were developed within collaborative community, even within a highly hierarchical system of power and control. Through genuine collaboration in which all parties felt equally valued, a compassion and a creativity inspired teachers and led them to flourish as people and as professionals. I hope that this article, alongside Claire Badger and her colleagues', has focused attention in teacher development towards important person-centred values in addition to vital practical skills. As Fielding argued, functional efficiency is important to the extent that it supports personal fulfilment, while the latter holds universal and life-long significance for both teachers and students.

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