Learning Circles: Providing spaces for renewal of both teachers and teacher educators

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This paper draws on my experiences of working as a university colleague in ‘learning circles’ in a South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) innovative curriculum redesign initiative entitled ‘Learning to Learn’. These learning circles involve designated school leaders from 6-8 schools/sites coming together twice a term, with Departmental curriculum officers and university colleagues, to reflect on and share their insights, tensions and dilemmas as leaders of the change process, and to grow their understanding of the process. It will be argued in this paper that learning circles provide powerful opportunities for the professional renewal of both teachers and teacher educators.

Introduction

The term ‘learning community’ is a current buzzword in the literatures on teacher development and school reform. Various names have been used to describe learning communities for teacher development including teacher research groups (Grimmett, 1995), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), learning circles (Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, Gagnon, 1998) inquiry communities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) and teacher networks (Lieberman, 2000). Regardless of name, there is a general agreement that the aim of such groups is to provide an enabling context for teachers’ professional growth, where the professional learning of teachers is shared and problematised (McLaughlin, 1997; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999; Warren-Little, 2002; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2003).

There are many reported benefits for teachers who participate in learning communities, including them feeling more positive about the profession (Darling-Hammond, 1996), reducing their isolation (Lieberman, 2000) and staying in the profession (Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001). Most importantly however, they are seen by many as an effective way to support teachers and bring about the changes that are deemed necessary for effective teaching and learning in the 21st century (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Lieberman, 2000; Warren-Little, 2002).

Frequently, ‘networked learning communities’ have some form of connection with academics resulting from various university-school partnerships and collaborative arrangements (McLaughlin, 1997; Lieberman, 2000; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). This ‘critical friend’ role is seen as a very important one in learning communities, in supporting teachers to critically examine practices and the assumptions underlying them and to provide access to a wider community of discourse (McLaughlin, 1997; Groundwater-Smith, 1998; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2003). However, unlike the reported benefits for teachers, there is much less known about the benefits for academics working in such communities. This paper attempts to redress this problem.
The paper begins with some background information and then describes the learning circles as they are utilized in the Learning to Learn project. It then highlights my learning as a result of co-facilitating learning circles for four years. The discussion which follows centers around the power of ‘learning conversations’. I argue that learning circles provide significant opportunities for the professional renewal of both teachers and teacher educators.

Background

Since 1999 the South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) has provided funding for selected schools to participate in a program of educational renewal through involvement in the Learning to Learn project. School leaders and groups of teachers participate in a Core Learning Program and a Learning Circle, in order to support site wide programs aimed at transformation of the local learning environment for students and teachers. The Core Learning Program draws on the expertise of educational theorists from Australia and overseas and has been deliberately designed to stimulate thinking about educational futures, purpose and transformation. The Learning Circles provide an opportunity for the designated change leaders in 6-8 sites to come together twice a term, with Departmental curriculum officers and university colleagues, to grow their understanding of the change process.

My colleague, Judy Peters, and I have been involved with Learning to Learn as university colleagues and co-facilitators of five of the learning circles since its inception. Thus far, there have been two ‘phases’ of Learning to Learn, with different sites involved in each phase. This paper reports on my experiences as a co-facilitator of learning circles, drawing particularly on data collected during an eighteen month period from the second phase of schools involved (mid ‘02 – ’03). These data include noted ‘learning conversations’ from three different learning circles (36 meetings), evaluation stories written by all learning circle participants during 2003 and notes and transcripts from meetings with the other learning circle co-facilitators.

Learning Circles in Learning to Learn

How we started:

When we started the second phase of learning circles, one of the first things to do was to clarify the ‘spirit of intent’. We knew from the previous two years of learning circles, that they were an effective structure for developing the notion of “school leaders as learners” (see Foster, Le Cornu & Peters, 2000). So, the spirit of intent was to ‘create a space’ for leaders of the change process to talk in depth with other leaders from a leadership perspective, to share with others the progress of their redesign project, support each other to develop strategies for building effective learning communities and explore issues confronting leaders.

One of the first things we did with each group was to brainstorm norms. We asked the question ‘What do you need to feel comfortable to participate in the group?’ and then asked the question ‘What might be some tensions?’ The identified norms included norms of support (ie respect, non-judgemental, assumption of positive intent, etc) and norms of challenge (ie asking critical questions, being ‘constructively critical’, etc.).
The main tension that was recognised was that not everyone would feel comfortable being challenged in the same way or being brought into the conversations.

The Project Manager expressed her wish that the aim of learning circles was “to get to the deep personal confrontation for leaders”, by “challenging assumptions for changing schools”. This challenge was accepted by the participants, many of whom expressed their desire for “respectful, critical, reflective conversations”. They acknowledged that this would involve “deep dialogue” and “going deeper”. These terms were then discussed with all of the participants, so that everyone had a shared understanding. This discussion was important in setting the tone of the learning circles as the following ideas were articulated: “challenge existing thinking, metacognition, transformational, understanding what your beliefs are/changing these beliefs, perplexing things, looking at things from different perspectives, level of discomfort, examine bias and prejudice, viewing knowledge as problematic”. The participants also recognised the need for a common/shared understanding of critical questioning so they brought questions and processes they used to the next learning circle.

**How they developed- the nature of the conversations:**

During 2003 we implemented a process called the Most Significant Change Process (MSC) as a learning tool to deepen participants’ understanding of the complexity of the change process. This process has been described elsewhere (see Le Cornu, Peters, Foster, Barrett & Mellowship, 2003) but it was clear that it was a valuable tool in promoting reflection and learning. It was seen to have potential as a powerful metacognitive process, as it assisted participants in clarifying and challenging thinking and assumptions, identifying changes in thinking and making values explicit. At each learning circle, there was work around the MSC process, as well as specific time for participants to share their latest challenges and dilemmas. A critical edge was brought to the conversations, by asking participants to share a tension that they were experiencing, rather than just focusing on what they have done since the previous learning circle.

An analysis of the content of the learning circles showed that the conversations centred around two main themes;

- developing a learning culture in their sites
- focusing on themselves and their teachers as learners and understanding the processes involved in learning (being metacognitive).

In developing a learning culture in their sites, one of the first things that the school leaders did for their staff was to make space for reflection. Time was made available for teachers to be involved in learning circles at the school level – to talk with each other about the new thinking they had been exposed to at the Core Learning Program, to share meanings and help them make their understandings explicit. The school leaders talked about the many challenges that existed for their staff including them confronting old assumptions around teaching and learning, letting go of some often long held beliefs and confronting new assumptions around student participation, which then led to conversations around choice and boundaries and roles. There was much talk around the ‘old system of ‘compliance and control’ and the new system of ‘facilitating a learning culture’.
The school leaders explored similar issues in regard to themselves and building a learning culture for staff. There was recognition that teachers had to be invited into learning again, rather than it being imposed and re-engaging them as active participants rather than them being in passive acquisitional mode. The leaders acknowledged that they needed to adopt a genuine invitational stance, which meant letting go of control. In inviting people to be more responsible for their own learning, different questions needed to be asked. For example, one principal asked her staff; “What kind of engagement do you want?” and “What level of support are you prepared to give?”

An analysis of the MSC stories revealed that people were changing their worldviews – in regard to themselves as learners and understanding the processes involved in learning. People wrote about the need to understand themselves, their patterns and how they respond and their preparedness to change their patterns. Some wrote about the non-linear process of change and their growing acceptance of ambiguity and uncertainty. For example, the following statements were made quite often; “It’s OK not to know, a state of confusion is OK” and “I know this is messy but that’s OK”. People were encouraged to share their stories of significant change with each other. As participants in the learning circles read each other’s stories, certain patterns emerged and criteria about significant change were identified. For example, one learning circle identified the following; Valuing dialogue in learning relationship, Tension and discomfort, Asking questions, Deconstruction of terms, Constantly challenging to make things explicit and voicing underlying assumptions, Interrogate own thinking and other people’s and Messiness (learning, unlearning, relearning).

The leaders agreed that there needed to be ‘safe’ places for learning where there were opportunities to think aloud and value everyone’s experience. The leaders concluded that they needed to build a culture where “we are all learners, risk taking is valued and encouraged, it is OK to make a mistake and where “a degree of discomfort in our learning actually provides for active learning”. This last point represented a very different view for some of the learning circle participants to that which they had held previously. One person captured what it meant for her: “It’s about being comfortable to be uncomfortable in relationships”.

Where we’re up to
At the time of writing this paper, we are at the stage of addressing the question ‘How do leaders sustain the level of engagement/change?’ This is an important question, given that the schools are only officially involved in Learning to Learn for another term, with only two more learning circles and given what we know about the difficulties associated with sustaining educational change. The participants are really looking forward to having this conversation and to continue their learning, as am I.

Benefits for a teacher educator: A space for my professional renewal

Being immersed in such rich ‘learning conversations’ regularly and being faced with the challenge of working with such thoughtful and skilled educators has had, and is having, a profound influence on me. This point was made very clear to me when I was faced with the challenge of writing my own MSC story. I had to really think about why my involvement with Learning to Learn had been significant. In my story I wrote: “A
significant change for me...has been what I would call a personal-professional one. I now think about educational issues and concepts differently. I also engage with ideas differently” (Le Cornu, 2003). Never have I been more aware of the tensions and dilemmas in my work. Never have I been more challenged by constantly asking myself questions like “What’s the real message I’m sending when I say...” or “Am I ‘controlling’ or ‘scaffolding’?” This can get very tiring when you do it at learning circles, in workshop groups with student teachers and following individual interactions with students/colleagues, etc.!

However, there is no doubt that I have been professionally re-energised through my involvement in learning circles. I am indebted to Learning to Learn for inviting me to co-facilitate the learning circles. I started the project seeing myself as a co-facilitator of learning circles. I now see myself as a ‘co-learner’. I find myself taking something away from each learning circle. This might be a quote to think more about such as “control yourself not to control!” or, it might be reflecting on a conversation such as the one in response to someone saying “I don’t need trusting relationships to learn!”

As well as being immersed in thinking and learning at each learning circle, we also had another structure which aided my learning which was regular meetings with the other co-facilitators; my colleague, Judy Peters and two DECS staff; Margot Foster, Learning to Learn Manager and Robyn Barrett, Learning to Learn Project Officer. These meetings allowed us to debrief and collaboratively plan the learning circles and engage in a level of reflection that enabled us to unpack our assumptions also. This was a most valuable learning process for me, particularly in relation to my responses to some of the things that occurred at learning circles. There were varying degrees of tensions apparent in the different learning circles. Sometimes these were related to the nature of the task (eg the writing process) but at other times these were related to how individuals negotiated (or didn’t negotiate!) their learning needs. For example, at one of the learning circles, a participant declared publicly “this is interfering with my learning”, in reference to what was happening at the time and then proceeded to engage everyone in an alternative task, which clearly did not meet the needs of some of the others. I needed help in unpacking my assumptions around this incident!

I have learnt much about facilitation of learning circles and the nature of professional learning. I have changed. I now ask different questions and interact as an educator differently to how I did before my involvement with Learning to Learn.

Discussion: The power of ‘learning conversations’

Clearly the Learning to Learn learning circles did provide a space for professional renewal of both teachers and teacher educators. They provided ‘time out’ from school/university for us to reflect, make sense of things and be challenged to think about things differently. They provided an opportunity for participants to “create as well as receive knowledge” (Lieberman, 2000). In the learning circles, we were all positioned as and became co-constructors of knowledge and co-learners. This is in line with a social constructivist view of learning, which suggests that learning should be “participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative and given over to the construction of
meanings rather than receiving them” (Bruner, 1996, p. 84). In this way, the learning circles acted as ‘learning communities’.

As noted earlier in the paper, the term ‘learning communities’ has become a buzzword in the literature. Some writers have criticised the use of the term, claiming that it often represents vague and underconceptualised notions of teacher professional community (eg Westheimer, 1998; Grossman, Wineburg & Woolworth, 2001). Such claims have led writers to clarify what is meant by the term. Westheimer (1998) for example, identified five common themes in theories of community: interdependence, interaction/participation, shared interests, concern for individual and minority views and meaningful relationships. If we take these as useful criteria, I would argue that these indicators were more or less present in each of the learning circles.

Another way to define learning communities is by their commitment to inquiry. Feiman-Nemser (2001) for example, argued that what distinguishes professional learning communities from support groups, where teachers mainly share ideas and offer encouragement, is “their critical stance and commitment to inquiry” (p. 1043). She stressed that teachers need to have the following dispositions to learn from teaching: “seek evidence, take risks, remain open to different interpretations” (p. 1030). We were constantly challenged to develop these dispositions in the learning circles. Another way of describing this, is to say that we were developing Cochran-Smith & Lytle’s (1999) notion of ‘inquiry as stance’. These writers use the metaphor to capture “the ways we stand, the ways we see and the lenses we see through” (p. 288). They argue that such a stance is critical to teacher learning in communities.

Most recently, Cochran-Smith (2003) stressed that engagement in learning communities involves: “…both learning new knowledge, questions and practices, and, at the same time, unlearning some long-held ideas, beliefs and practices, which are often difficult to uproot” (p. 9). This notion of ‘learning and unlearning’ was very evident for both the leaders and myself. Hence, from a number of perspectives, I would argue that the learning circles provided space for participants to experience and engage in a learning community. They simultaneously provided space for participants to develop new understandings about how to establish a learning community. For the school leaders, this related to their schools, while for me, it related to all aspects of my work. The learning circles were thus very significant in their influence.

A key finding from my involvement in learning circles has been the power of ‘learning conversations’. This is a term that was used often by the participants in learning circles, mainly in reference to the nature of the dialogue that occurred in their sites. They would refer to classroom ‘learning conversations’ between teachers and students and students and students, which allowed for meaningful dialogue and opportunities for students to make connections in their learning. They would also refer to ‘learning conversations’ between teachers, which enabled teachers to “make sense of their learning”. I would argue that such conversations were also a feature of the Learning Circles. When asked to define a learning circle, a number of the respondents answered with; “time and space to go deeper into meaning”.
A learning conversation engages learners in a deeper way than an ordinary conversation or exchange of ideas might. It is a conversation that “looks into things”, with the idea of making meaning and/or coming to a deeper understanding. It could also be called an inquiry conversation or a reflective conversation. It goes well beyond describing as it involves analysing and problematising. Feldman (1999) argued that conversations are a form of inquiry which enable people to “work through the dilemmas, quandaries and dissonances that relate to their living and being in the world” (p. 137).

Another way that learning conversations engage participants in a deeper way, is that they require different ways of relating to that which many experienced educators are familiar. Grossman et al (2001) explained the challenges this way;

Forming a professional community requires teachers to engage in both intellectual and social work – new ways of thinking and reasoning collectively as well as new forms of interacting interpersonally … Learning from colleagues requires both a shift in perspective and the ability to listen hard to other adults, especially as these adults struggle to formulate thoughts in response to challenging intellectual content. (p. 973)

Thus, to really engage in learning communities, or to participate at a ‘deep level’, individuals need a preparedness to learn from and with others and accept the responsibility of contributing to the learning of others.

To understand the power of learning conversations, I found Feldman’s (1999) analysis of the role of conversation in collaborative action research useful. He reviewed three examples of the use of conversation in collaborative action research – the first is what Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) call oral inquiry processes, the second is what Hollingsworth (1994) refers to as collaborative conversations and the third is what Feldman (1996) has called long and serious conversations. From analysing the various conversations that were used in teacher meetings, he concluded that conversations have the following characteristics: “they occur among people, are cooperative, have direction, result in new meaning and are not governed by the clock. He explained that while group meetings are governed by the clock, the teachers’ conversations are not in that they “continued to the next meetings, involved new participants in school or at home and have evolved in directions that include participants in new ways” (Feldman, 1996, p. 133). This was certainly my experience from the Learning Circles – I would go home or back to University eager to talk to anyone about what had happened! Or, we would reconnect in learning circles, with unfinished conversations from the previous one. Some of the power then was in the energy they generated.

The ultimate power of learning conversations is that the locus of control in the learning process remains with each person. Margot Foster, Manager of Learning to Learn, alluded to the power of this when she said, “Generative learning is generating your own constructed new meanings, your own ‘aha moments’, it’s not implementing others.” As a teacher educator involved in the Learning to Learn learning circles, I have had a number of ‘aha moments’ for which I am extremely grateful!
Conclusion

There is no doubt in my mind that the benefits of learning circles for me, as a teacher educator were very similar to those espoused for teachers. That is, they enabled professional renewal. The learning circles provided a space away from my usual work and, given the nature of the learning conversations, provided me with much needed professional nourishment – intellectually and emotionally.

One of my challenges now as a teacher educator is creating opportunities to utilize the notion of learning conversations in my work with pre-service teachers, teachers and indeed, other teacher educators.

References
