“It’s all right for you two, you obviously like each other”: recognising the pitfalls and challenges in pursuing collaborative professional learning through team teaching.

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The authors of this paper do certainly like each other and recognise that this has no doubt helped to make our experience of team teaching enjoyable. However we are not alone in believing that teaching together as university academics offers a particularly productive context for collaborative reflection and professional development. The idea of collaborative peer reflection has been explored in various ways and a range of educational contexts in the past decade (Knights and Sampson, 1995, Martin and Double 1998, Crow and Smith 2005, Knights, Meyer and Sampson 2005). Whilst informal conversations about teaching can take place at any time the addition of some form of structure appears to make the conversation more likely to lead to insight and professional learning. This may be achieved through the observation of one colleague by another followed by feedback and discussion (Jarzabkowski and Bone, Martin and Double 1998, Cosh 1998). The input from a colleague who has been present in the teaching situation adds a valuable additional dimension to informal individual reflection, ‘the process of engaging in a critical dialogue about one’s practice is important not only in opening up one’s reflections to public scrutiny but also, we would argue, in providing an ideal forum for collaborative learning.’ (Crow and Smith 2005).

When the relationship is not one of practitioner and observer but one of colleagues sharing equal responsibility for the planning, teaching and assessment of an academic program and working together in the classroom with students our experience has shown that the possibilities for productive collaborative reflection are greatly enhanced (Knights and Sampson 1995, Knights, Meyer and Sampson 2005). Our belief that team teaching offers a unique context for professional learning which, at the same time, provides a stimulating learning experience for students, has led us to argue that universities should be prepared to fund team teaching, from time to time, as a professional development activity rather than an additional teaching cost.

However comments such as the one in the title of this paper remind us that team teaching is not always a positive experience. The quotation comes from a participant in one of our workshops on team teaching who spoke about a
negative experience of team teaching in a situation where the team teaching partnership was dictated by the need to balance subject expertise rather than a mutual commitment to collaborative teaching. This serves to remind us that collaboration is a complex and problematic process (Head, 2003) and that “enforced collegiality” (Hargreaves 1994) has the potential to undermine as well as to promote professional learning.

This conference, with its invitation to go “beyond the dogma of reflective practice,” offers an opportunity to review some of the difficulties that may be experienced in realising the potential for productive professional learning through team teaching partnerships. In this paper data obtained from interviews and discussions with colleagues in our Faculty of Education about their experiences of team teaching, together with our own experience, is used to illustrate some of the dimensions of the complexity of collaboration. The work of Head (2003) and Hargreaves(1992) relating to professional collaboration in school teaching provides a useful starting point for the discussion.

One issue to be considered is the way that the team teaching partnership has come about and in particular whether it has arisen through the desire of particular colleagues to work together in order to learn from each other or as a decision from management, as in the situation described above. Accounts of team teaching partnerships which have been seen to lead to productive professional learning tend to stress the value of working alongside trusted and supportive colleagues where such collaboration has been freely chosen by the participants. This is seen to provide a positive environment for reflection. However Hargreaves draws our attention to the fact that collegiality may not be freely chosen and may be encouraged by “management” with a specific managerial purpose in mind,

In these cases, collegiality is either an unwanted managerial imposition from the point of view of teachers subjected to it or, more usually, a way of coopting teachers to fulfilling administrative purposes and the implementation of external mandates. (Hargreaves 1992 p190)

Another version of the concern about whose interests are served by the encouragement of collaborative reflection is found in a chapter from a recent publication edited by Boud, Cressey and Docherty, Productive Reflection at Work. In their chapter on Discursive practices at work, Elmholdt and Brinkmann pose questions about the value to workers of engaging in collaborative reflection,

Post-bureaucratic organizational forms especially work to constitute hyper reflexive subjectivities. In such organizations, which often lack visible controls and authorities, individuals are continually asked to reflexively monitor themselves and their relations to others. Gradually employees become more engaged in different kinds of emotional labour
at work, where they are asked to be specific kinds of people, rather than mere professionals with skills independent of their private personalities...The organisational shift from hierarchies to networks and teamwork demands increasing self-reflectivity. This is not just liberating, but also threatens to stifle personal character and makes it hard to work out a coherent structure in one's life narrative. (Boud et al 2005, P176)

This rather bleak description suggests that rather than being supported in their professional learning by participating in reflective team teaching the academic partners could be in danger of losing track of their individual pathways.

An example of this kind of concern was expressed by one of the interviewees in our study. She is an experienced sessional academic who had been asked to share the teaching of a large class with a newly appointed full time lecturer. She commented that she did have some worries that by teaching alongside him and sharing her knowledge and understanding of the course she had helped to design she might be eventually doing herself out of a job. This hardly provides a fruitful context for peer reflection and learning.

Apart from the kind of situation described above where team teaching may be seen to have a value to the Faculty through orientating a new staff member, team teaching in universities is not particularly encouraged by the way staffing hours are allocated. This means that those who choose to team teach often do so at the expense of a heavier teaching load but they do this because they have a strong commitment to the value of the process. Descriptions of the experience of team teaching in these circumstances (Knights and Sampson, 1995 Crow and Smith, 2005) indicate that the relationship seems to have the characteristics described by Hargreaves as typical of a collaborative culture; spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space and unpredictable (Hargreaves, 1992). Paradoxically a greater organisational commitment to supporting team teaching for professional development could have the effect of changing this spontaneous and development oriented relationship into something more like Hargreaves' situation of “contrived collegiality” which he describes as administratively regulated, compulsory, implementation-oriented, fixed in time and space and designed to have high predictability in its outcomes (Hargreaves 1992, p196). This is the reason that a research team investigating the nature of informal workplace learning in a large vocational education institute in Sydney decided to abandon one of the original purposes of their project which involved the possibility of providing organisational support for some of the informal professional development processes they identified,

Part of the original design of the research project was a stage in which some of the practices identified through the study would be developed as formal interventions to 'improve' learning at work. This idea was abandoned at an early point once it became clear that the richness of
learning we identified could be compromised by attempting to move it into the system world of the organization. (Boud et al 2005, P167)

Experiences such as this suggest that perhaps the authors and others need to be cautious about the formalising of team teaching as a professional development activity.

A very practical barrier to the wider adoption of team teaching as a vehicle for collaborative professional development is the issue of the additional time needed for planning and preparation when subjects are taught by a team rather than a single lecturer. Head's analysis of the process of collaboration and his distinction between "functional" and "effective" collaboration provide a useful aid to understanding the complexity of the process. He argues that collaboration is multi-dimensional, and 'at its simplest level' comprises a range of closely related acts such as coordinating, consulting, communicating and cooperating (Head,2003 p51) All of these need to be achieved at a satisfactory level simply to allow the team teaching to work at a functional level. To move beyond this to 'effective' collaboration' (Head 2003 p51), we have argued that there needs to be a mutual commitment not just to planning but to dialogue in which all elements of the teaching are up for question (Knights, Meyer and Sampson 2005). Head's list of the aspects of the teaching/learning situation which might be the subject of such a dialogue illustrates why finding time for this is a challenging process. His list includes, the purpose of the teaching task, its value and derivation, the dimensions of the task, agreed strategies for engaging with the task and overcoming difficulties, criteria for assessing the success of the task and a shared understanding of the relevance of the current task for future learning. (Head 2003 p52) When thinking about this range of issues it is easy to see why most team teaching remains at a functional level of collaboration and often consists of allocating different aspects of the program to different members of the team. Even this level requires time and effort on the part of the team members to make sure the course functions. Moving into 'deeper' issues may provide opportunities for deeper professional sharing and learning but it is certain to make far more demands in terms of time.

A comment from one of the interviewees in our study illustrates the influence of time constraints on the level of collaboration entered into. In this case the team teaching partners were particularly stressed for time and working with existing course materials that had been developed by one of them but not the other,

We actually physically met with the materials and went through them, did our lesson plans and went through the materials… doing it on the day didn’t leave much scope for devising anything particularly new or junking what we might plan as the result of the discussion, coming up with something new, it was limited
This was contrasted with a previous experience of team teaching where the team members had designed the course from scratch and thus had,

some sort of shared commitment to the content of the subject…, to thinking about and learning about the process itself so we had to spend time together.

This had led to a process described as, 'a kind of interactive dance, much more integrated and interwoven.'

Different levels of familiarity with the program is only one of many examples of the differences between academic colleagues that may make it hard for them to engage in a collaborative reflective process from a position of equality. Teachers in all areas of the education system are used to working in privacy from their colleagues, the classroom or lecture theatre is rarely observed by others apart from the learners. Team teaching, where colleagues work alongside each other in the teaching situation, invades this privacy and requires the development of a particular kind of relationship, a teaching relationship. This is the relationship which can provide particularly fruitful ground for collaborative reflection because of the equality of investment in the successful outcome (Knights and Sampson, 1995 p58) but it also presents challenges for teachers used to sole responsibility for their teaching spaces. Signs of this vulnerability can be seen in several responses from our interviewees, even though they had all volunteered to be part of the team teaching project. For example a very experienced teacher said,

When the whole proposal for the team teaching exercise came up I thought ‘Oh!’ because I really had never done anything like that in my whole life so I thought ‘Oh gosh, will I be able to do this? Will my team partner be able to deal with me?’ because I know I’m all bloody over the place.

In a different partnership one member indicated a strong awareness of the differences in academic status between herself and her teaching partner and spoke of her,

apprehension as to whether or not I would be a bit of a shadow where A was concerned because she was a senior person, she had a tremendous grasp of the material..

this apprehension was clearly evident to her team teaching partner who commented that

B came in with, I think, a good deal of awe about working with me, very much the ‘humble servant’ and I guess that I said ‘Look this is absolutely crazy, we can’t do it this way’
A similar sense of anxiety was evident in an interview where a newly appointed staff member described her experience of a team teaching relationship with a more experienced colleague as extremely professionally productive but her description indicates a certain amount of vulnerability,

I think that this process has told me that I have a lot to learn. I've always been very harsh on myself, I've always told myself that I have to do the very best. I think when you're teaching with experienced people you tend to look at your shortcomings and I thought ‘Gee, I've got a lot to learn here.’ Not to put myself down but to note things I’ve got to learn.

A comment from her senior colleague suggests that she was not unrealistic in feeling that she was to some extent ‘on trial’

Well if ever there was an opportunity to say, ‘We put this person in this job. Can she really do it?’ there it was

The sense of vulnerability reflected in the quotations above would obviously be far worse in situations where the members of teaching team had not chosen to teach together but had been required to do so because of the need for different content expertise or the large size of a cohort of students. The remark which gives the title to this paper came from someone who was clearly frustrated by the very positive picture we were presenting about our experience of team teaching and challenged us to offer suggestions about how the process could work in situations where the team members felt they had nothing to gain from teaching together. This was an intervention which gave rise to on going collaborative reflection on our part and we are, by now, well aware that there is no easy recipe for harmonious team teaching.

We have advocated the use of a structured reflection framework to enable the members of the teaching team to engage in on going reflection as part of their teaching process but this can only be productive if the team members are interested and willing to devote time to it. (Knights and Sampson, 1995). When colleagues are uninterested in collaborative reflection they can operate successfully at the “functional collaboration” level but the professional learning will be limited to the learning that can come from the opportunity to observe a colleague in action in the classroom. If the team members actively dislike each other or have extremely divergent views about the way to help students learn then we would hope that they be allowed to divide the program between them and do not attempt to teach together let alone reflect together.

Paradoxically it is the difficulties and hiccups encountered in planning and teaching together that seem to present the most fruitful opportunities for critical reflection and thus professional learning. These are the ‘disorienting dilemmas’ that Mezirow describes as the precursors to perspective transformation (Mezirow,1991) These dilemmas are likely to be acknowledged and addressed
when team teaching partners have a level of trust and respect for each other and a commitment to developing their teaching relationship. Our experience is that a structured approach to collaborative reflection provides a framework within which a mutually respectful teaching relationship can develop, enabling open self-revealing discussion, real engagement with each other, commitment to the process and a willingness to persist through discomfort and frustration. Our initial enthusiasm for the process, supported by theoretical concepts about experiential learning and action research (Knights and Sampson, 1995) has persisted and been further informed by recent work about workplace learning and, particularly, communities of practice (Knights, Meyer and Sampson 2005). However we have also come to realise that there are still many questions to be answered about the process of reflective team teaching, for example there seems to be far more enthusiasm for team teaching among female academics than among our male colleagues, which suggests the need for some gender oriented research. So, whilst our advocacy may be slightly more cautious we are still enthusiasts and agree wholeheartedly with the statement of one of our team teaching interviewees,

..you don’t get rich learning for yourself and possibly the students, I don’t know, but you don’t get that richness unless you engage in the critical reflection, in the combined critical reflection.

References


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(whilst maintaining our strong belief in the potential value of reflective team teaching as a productive source of professional learning for academics we acknowledge that it may be more disruptive to the norms and expectations of university teaching than we had previously recognised and that this presents a range of challenges)