

Professional learning communities as transformative spaces?

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Abstract

Learning communities appear in educational policies and research as privileged sites of (inter)personal, social and institutional learning related to inquiry, empowerment and change. However, given the co-existence of conflicting rationalities in educational settings, their transformative potential cannot be readily assumed. Transformative professional learning entails a commitment to the democratization of schooling based on the promotion of teacher/learner autonomy through critical inquiry and transformative action. This assumption underlies the work of the GT-PA (*Grupo de Trabalho-Pedagogia para a Autonomia/Working Group Pedagogy for Autonomy*), a multidisciplinary learning community of teachers, teacher educators and researchers founded in 1997 and coordinated by the second author. In late 2011 a naturalistic research study was initiated by the first author to inquire into its transformative potential. Focusing on the findings from seventeen interviews to GT-PA members, a close connection was found between belonging to the community, professional empowerment and autonomy-oriented educational change. However, the gap between the Group's culture and the cultures perceived in professional contexts seems to encourage innovation at an individual level and inhibit the expansion of change. Collective change appears to require a more active engagement in professional settings that is not totally dependent on belonging to the community.

Introduction

Since the late 90s there has been an expansion of community-oriented reforms and innovations, usually associated to social democracy, equity and justice (Unesco, 2012; Savage, 2011). Learning communities appear in educational policies and research as privileged and infallible sites of (inter)personal, social and institutional learning and reform related to collaborative inquiry, empowerment, quality change and social equity.¹ However, their transformative potential cannot be readily assumed because learning communities are not intrinsically good phenomena. Actually, many practices and discourses of learning communities in education constitute examples of “teachers’ and schools’ cosmetic emancipation” (Hargreaves, 1994) and do not entail a political struggle for more democratic and humanistic values. Therefore, learning communities must be scrutinised critically as regards their assumptions and goals, their practices, and their empowering impact (Barton & Tusting 2005; Orellana, 2008; Savage 2011; Thomas & Niesz, 2012; Vieira, 2009; Wood, 2007).

Transformative professional learning entails a commitment to the democratization of schooling based on the promotion of teacher/learner autonomy through critical inquiry

¹ On the value of learning communities, see e.g. Chacón, Sayago & Yuncosa, 2008; Coombe, 1999; Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999; DuFour, R., DuFour, R. & Eaker, R. (2008); Foord & Haar, 2008; Holly, 2004; Hord, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Levine, 1999; Lieberman, 2000; Lima, 2012; Little, 2003, 2012; MacLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Maton, 2008; Maton & Salem 1995; Muñoz, 2009; Raywid, 1993; Retallick, Cocklin & Coombe, 1999; Sergiovanni, 1994; Servage, 2008; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Stoll et al. 2006; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008; Raywid, 1993; Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Wood, 2007.

and transformative action (Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007). This assumption underlies the work of the GT-PA (*Grupo de Trabalho-Pedagogia para a Autonomia/Working Group Pedagogy for Autonomy*), a multidisciplinary learning community of teachers, teacher educators and researchers founded in 1997 at the University of Minho (Braga, Portugal) and coordinated by the second author (see Vieira, 2003, 2009; Fernandes & Vieira, 2009).

The GT-PA seeks to surpass the divide between theory and practice, teaching and research, and schools and universities in the production of educational knowledge and change. It aims at exploring autonomy as an educational goal in teaching and teacher education settings, and its members have been actively engaged in the development of studies and experiments, as well as in the dissemination and publication of their work.² In late 2011 a naturalistic study was initiated by the first author, who is a member of the GT-PA, to analyse the dynamics and the transformative potential of this community. Three research strategies have been used – a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to Group members, and the analysis of the Groups' publications. In this paper we look at data from the interviews so as to understand the extent to which the GT-PA represents a space for the development of professional autonomy towards democratic educational change.

Method

A semi-structured interview was carried out with seventeen GT-PA members: twelve schoolteachers and five university teacher educators/researchers. They were selected in order to represent the Group's diversity in terms of professional context, disciplinary areas, professional roles, and time of membership.

The interview included thirteen questions about reasons for joining the Group, significant episodes as a Group member, the Group's impact on professional development, practices and professional contexts, the Group's culture and the culture of professional contexts, university-school relationships within the Group, the importance of participating in dissemination activities, personal constraints as a member, and factors that favor or hamper the sustainability of the Group. The questions were sent to the participants before the interview so as to ensure trust and time for reflection. The interviews were conducted individually. They were audiotaped, fully transcribed and sent to the interviewees for content validation.

The interviewees' discourse was analysed according to four dimensions of professional autonomy defined by Jiménez Raya, Lamb & Vieira (2007), which are seen as macro-competences necessary to promote a pedagogy for autonomy:

- A. Developing a critical vision of education
- B. Managing local constraints so as to open up spaces for manoeuvre
- C. Centring teaching/teacher education on learning
- D. Interacting with the professional community

Based on the same authors, a set of subdimensions was considered for each dimension (see Table I below).

² At present, the GT-PA integrates more than a hundred teachers and about fifteen academic researchers/ teacher educators from different institutions. The Group meets four to five times a year to share experiences and discuss autonomy issues. Its agenda is flexible and determined by the members' needs and interests. Every two or three years, the Group organizes a national conference to disseminate its work.

Results

The results presented in Table I indicate the presence of the subdimensions of professional autonomy in the participants' discourse (n=17), even though that presence varied among participants in terms of both content and extension.

The following aspects emerged in the discourse of all the interviewees:

- Predisposition to learn and to keep informed about approaches to education and how they can promote learner/teacher autonomy
- Seeing teaching/teacher education as inquiry-oriented activities
- Uncovering constraints to autonomy (their learners' and their own)
- Disseminating experiences and confronting one's voice with other voices in the professional community

Table I. Transformative potential of the GT-PA– discourse evidence (n=17)

<i>A. Developing a critical view of education</i>	
Predisposition to learn and to keep informed about approaches to education and how they can promote learner/teacher autonomy	17
Seeing teaching/teacher education as inquiry-oriented activities	17
Understanding oneself and one's learners as agents of educational and social change	10
Taking a critical stance towards values and ends of (teacher) education	10
Taking a critical stance towards the educational value of syllabi, textbooks or other pedagogic materials	9
Encouraging learners/teachers to be critical towards social and educational values and practices	7
<i>B. Managing local constraints so as to open up spaces for manoeuvre</i>	
Uncovering constraints to autonomy (their learners' and their own)	17
Shaping pedagogical choices so as to open up possibilities for greater learner/teacher autonomy	14
Compromising between tradition and innovation without losing one's ideals	6
Challenging school/university routines and conventions (be subversive if necessary)	6
Involving learners/teachers in finding creative solutions to problems that affect learning	5
Sharing with learners/teachers one's pedagogic beliefs and concerns	4
Facing complexity, dilemmas, conflict, uncertainty and difference as part of teaching/teacher education	3
Articulating the personal aspects of learning with the social/interactive nature of the school/university culture	3
<i>C. Centring teaching/teacher education on learning</i>	
Fostering the self/co-management of ideas and decisions with and among learners/teachers	11
Encouraging co-operation and team work among learners/teachers	11
Fostering the learners'/teachers' self-esteem and willingness to assume responsibility for learning	10

Involving learners and teachers in reflection about substantive and process knowledge	9
Finding ways to enhance the formative role of self/evaluation and the negotiation of assessment	8
Fostering self/co-management of activities (planning, monitoring and evaluation)	6
Encouraging learners/teachers to learn how to collect and analyse data on their own learning in order to better understand their strengths and weaknesses	5
Fostering knowledge of and experimentation with learning strategies in and outside class	4
Collecting and analysing data so as to better understand and improve teaching/teacher education and learning	4
<i>D. Interacting with the professional community</i>	
Disseminating experiences and confronting one's voice with other voices in the professional community	17
Sharing theories, practices and concerns with significant members of the professional community	8
Participating in public debate on issues regarding schooling and education in general	3
Inviting others (learners, peers, mentors, etc.) to help one improve teaching/teacher education and learning	1

The Group is seen by the participants as a source of knowledge and inspiration for the reconstruction and visibility of professional experience, with a positive impact on self-esteem, self-confidence, motivation, and the reinforcement of pedagogic convictions. These aspects are believed to be essential to manage tensions, dilemmas and uncertainties.

When asked to describe the Group's culture and the culture of their own professional context, all participants expressed the idea that there is a huge gap between them. The GT-PA is represented as a community based on democratic and humanistic values such as mutual respect, tolerance, collaboration, intellectual challenge, personal valorization, safety, motivation, well-being, and hope. On the contrary, the professional contexts (schools and universities) are perceived as sites of resistance to change. The interviewees refer to diverse negative characteristics: interpersonal mistrust, conflict, individualism, competition, negative criticism, demotivation, disengagement, routine, and obsession with efficiency and accountability. Let's look at two accounts:

“(…) all of us who come to the GT-PA are eager to learn more and share and learn with one another's criticism. In disciplinary groups [at school], however, teachers are always afraid that there are better teachers or teachers that want to seem better. (…) That's why teachers don't learn much within disciplinary groups. Collaborative work isn't effective. They want it to be effective, but it isn't. There are few disciplinary groups that really do valid collaborative work... due to either personal insecurity or personal envy, or other reasons that I don't understand. (...) In the GT-PA I have always felt that we are a group of people who want to go there and share experiences and get help and feedback from constructive criticism, in a way that we all learn. So I have always thought that everyone goes there in the same spirit and we always had the support from people like the coordinator, people who support us a lot and have never made us feel bad, even when we say something wrong, which we certainly do sometimes... They have always motivated us to go forward. That's how I have always felt in the GT-PA. And that's something I don't feel at school. At school it is very different. (...) Many pedagogic experiences I have done, which I believe should have been disseminated in disciplinary groups so that we could all take lessons from them, were never disseminated. (...) I always had the feeling that people thought 'She believes she is the one that knows everything and does everything'. Therefore, I

demotivated completely. So, I didn't disseminate most of the experiences I developed at school. (...) Not in my school."(I2: schoolteacher, translated)

"I think the GT-PA strengthens, it has strengthened, my convictions that it is important not to adopt narcissistic and autistic discourses at the university (...) as far as schools are concerned (...) and have realistic discourses instead, as regards what schools are and what they can be.(...) Realistic discourses but utopian at the same time, in a way.(...) The main objective is to value and show what teachers do at schools. (I16:University teacher, translated)

Even though a close connection was found in the participants' discourse between belonging to the community, professional empowerment and autonomy-oriented educational change, the gap between professional cultures and the GT-PA seems to inhibit the expansion of innovation. Actually, only a few participants were able to engage other colleagues in collaborative innovation processes.

Conclusions and discussion

Pedagogical cultures represent complex sociocultural phenomena guided by evolving social representations and interests (Ball, 1987; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2002; Frago, 2007; Guerra, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; Sarason, 1996), which means that they are ineffable to a certain extent, and generalizations about their nature and impact are always questionable. The study of the GT-PA can only disclose fragments of its diverse, multifaceted and mutating culture(s), but it is certainly relevant as an attempt to interrogate and discuss the community's potential as a transformative space. The study itself enhances that potential since it aims at understanding and transforming the community from within.

There is discourse evidence in the interviews that this community represents a transformative space where members develop their professional autonomy in the service of a pedagogy for autonomy. It appears to constitute a supportive "third space" (Zeichner, 2010) where diverse forms of knowledge converge and participants reflect and interact freely to produce innovation. However, there is also evidence that the community develops against the grain as professional cultures present severe constraints to collaboration and inquiry. Paradoxically, this cultural gap represents the community's 'raison d'être' but also its main obstacle as regards the transformation of contexts at large. In seeking to subvert cultures that stifle professional autonomy and democratic educational change, the community seems to be both justified and constrained by those cultures.

Learning communities directed to democratic transformation may create "oasis of public time" (Vieira, 2009: 279), distancing their members from their professional contexts because these represent a vision of education they do not identify with. When institutional cultures are perceived as being alien to professionals' convictions and impermeable to change, they tend to carry out innovation in isolation, away from the public eye, and avoid assuming leadership roles towards enacting wider organizational change. Therefore, institutional cultures may remain unchallenged.

Members of communities like the GT-PA need to realize that their actions are counter-cultural movements created and experienced *within* institutional cultures and are, therefore, part of those cultures. Institutional cultures are not homogeneous and integrate diverse sub-cultures. These need to be made public and debatable. The transformation of professional cultures will be more significant if there is true commitment to personal and organizational questioning and the reconfiguring of power relations towards the development of a "pedagogy of conflict" where dominant

epistemological models are questioned and diversity and dissonance are acknowledged as necessary ingredients of a more emancipatory change (Santos, 2009). Communities like the GT-PA may support this movement, but they are not sufficient. They give voice to professionals and enhance their role as agents of change, but only in schools can teachers struggle for a more collective discussion and transformation of education.

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