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## **Collaborative dialogue for learning: What is the impact?**

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### **Background**

The New Zealand University of Waikato Assess to Learn team has been involved in providing 'assessment for learning' teacher professional development over the past 9 years. As part of this New Zealand Ministry of Education funded project teachers have, with the support of an assessment adviser, individually reflected on data collected from their respective classrooms. The process of critical reflection enables teachers to grapple with their assessment practice in a way that supports students as learners. These reflective dialogue sessions have however, generally been undertaken by individual teachers with the advisor. This case study research focuses on and explores what happens when teachers engage dialogically in collaborative inquiry with their colleagues. The use of a dialogical process to interpret and make sense of student voice data has proven to have significant potential to enhance teacher engagement, stimulate a careful and thorough analysis of the data and support practitioners to identify next steps in their professional learning.

This research is located within the educational settings in which we currently work as advisers, facilitating professional learning. In our role we assist teachers to give effect to the New Zealand Curriculum, developing their expertise with "Teaching as Inquiry" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p.35). This process of critical reflection enables teachers to grapple with their assessment practice, a necessity if they are to embed the recently legislated National Standards in a robust way that supports students as learners.

### **Research Questions**

Collaborative inquiry in this instance is defined as a process consisting of repeated episodes of reflection and action through which a group of peers strives to answer a question of importance to them (Bray, Lee, Smith and Yorks, 2000).

The researchers wanted to know the following:

*What happens when teachers focus on and interpret their assessment classroom observation data collaboratively?*

*How can teachers reflect on their part in this process in order to identify the factors that contribute to clarity for their next learning steps?*

### **Methods**

This research focused on the impact collaboratively mining and interpreting classroom observation data had on teacher participants. The adviser researchers invited a purposive sample of two or three teachers from schools in which they were working to participate in this research on collaborative inquiry. Each of the groups of teachers developed questions directly from classroom issues and successes, taking an appreciative inquiry approach in order to enhance student learning. They analysed and critically explored their student and teacher voice data, collaborating through reflective dialogue. Isaacs (1999) uses the term "reflective dialogue" to refer to a process/place "where you become willing to think about the rules underlying what you do - the reasons for your thoughts and actions. You see more clearly what you have taken for granted...Reflective dialogue can then give rise to generative dialogue, in which we begin to create entirely new possibilities and create new levels of interaction." (p. 38)

The researchers consider that an instrumentalist approach to learning and assessment promotes a proletarianisation of teachers which results in loss of autonomy and professionalism within teaching (Harris, 1990, as cited in Willis, 1994). By problematising practice through collaborative inquiry and critically reflecting on evidence, teachers can reclaim their professionalism, targeting improvement which is specifically linked to the sociocultural environments of their classrooms and schools and communities. A dialogic approach is integral to this process. The groups of teacher participants in this research were positioned as the 'knowers' through the process of dialogical feedback within the collaborative research settings. This positioning challenges the traditional view of the adviser as an 'expert' imparting knowledge.

## **Frame**

Apple (1991) suggests that critical intellectuals need to shift their roles from being universalising spokespersons to cultural workers whose task is to take away barriers that prevent people from speaking for themselves. In keeping with this approach the decision has been made to include teacher voice in this paper. It is important to note however, that the empowerment suggested by such a view is a process that one undertakes for oneself; it is not something done to or for someone else: "The heart of the idea of empowerment involves people coming into a sense of their own power, a new relationship with their own contexts." (Fox, 1888, cited in Lather, 1991)

## **Research findings**

Our findings suggest that collaborative reflection has the potential to establish sustainable practice past the end of teacher and school involvement in a professional learning programme. Dialogic learning relationships are integral to this process, as social inquiry involves engaging in talk that is challenging and critical. Collaborative dialogue can support teachers groups to self-transform. Working with others to inquire has several benefits as described by Kasl and York (2002). Groups offer ready access to diverse and challenging perspectives. They create social support for construction and reconstruction of meaning. The teachers who participated in this research emphasised to us the importance of the affective domain. The establishment of trust and honesty is essential if teachers are to reflect openly, take risks and share their experiences without shame and fear of judgment.

The capacity for dialogue challenges teachers to go beyond themselves to take a shared role for the responsibility for the learning of the group. A dialogical process can support teachers to see other perspectives. According to Game & Metcalfe (2009) people who identify with knowledge take it personally, seeing the world and others only for what these say about themselves, as a mirror of themselves. People in dialogue, however, are able to hear the differences offered by others, because they are not personally affronted. They can imagine the experience of others and therefore understand how different perspectives can co-exist. Our findings support this view of collaborative dialogue as a process which enables teachers to operate in the affective domain.