



## Collaboration Among Teachers in Polytechnics

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PASI SAVONMÄKI

*University of Jyväskylä, Finland*

### INTRODUCTION

Developers of teacher education emphasise a communal approach, entailing an ability to renew oneself professionally, discuss relevant issues, and solve problems together with other people, as one of the starting points of the teacher's work. There are increased demands that a dialogue should be initiated among teachers, between teachers and students, and between teachers and representatives of working life. It has been suggested that multi-professionalism, where the aim is to cross the boundaries separating traditional professional domains, should be adopted as one of the principles to underpin polytechnics' educational activities. This involves the creation of a new action culture, which generates collaboration of a new kind.

### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The research reported here is a sub-study of the *Teachership – Lifelong Learning* project being carried out at the Institute for Educational Research as part of the *Life as Learning* research programme financed by the Academy of Finland for the period 2003-2006. The aim of this project is firstly to describe polytechnic teachers' conceptions of collaboration and collaboration practices. The second aim is to find out what role collaboration plays in the teachers' professional socialisation. The third problem addressed in the study concerns the organisational culture of a polytechnic and how it supports collaboration. The theoretical background is derived from approaches used in research on teacher thinking and in organisational studies. Among the most important starting points are: a participative perspective on learning how to collaborate (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the school as a loosely coupled organisation (Orton & Weick, 1990), and a micropolitical perspective on collaboration (Ball, 1987; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Salo, 2002).

### METHODS

The empirical research was conducted in two phases. In autumn 2003, data was gathered by videotaping five group interviews of 3-4 people each. The interviewees were from different polytechnics. Thematically, this first round of data-gathering covered the contents and forms of teacher collaboration. In the second stage in 2005, data has been collected from one polytechnic unit using personal interviews and official documents. The analysis of the second round data-gathering is unfinished.

In this first data-gathering situation, group interviews help to define the research problems concerning teacher collaboration more precisely. Apart from being appropriate for the current stage of the research, group interviewing has also the technical advantage of making it possible to interview several people during a single session. However, the bigger the group grows, the more difficult it is, as a rule, to find a date that suits everyone.

The members of an interview group are often from the same work community, making group interviewing a much-used method in the development of work communities. In such contexts it has a special function as an action-research technique. A group interview focuses around issues that unite the interviewees. Becoming aware of these shared issues, bringing them into consciousness and making sense of them, is often easier in a group where the members help each other to talk about, compare and conceptualise their experiences. Listening to other people often also helps one to articulate one's own opinions and experiences. In a safe atmosphere, and before an audience that seem to understand what one is talking about, people feel comfortable about discussing their own work, for example. Hence, shared experiences or, for instance, belonging to a common subculture are an important precondition of a successful group interview.

In this study, the teachers are polytechnic teachers from different work communities. What unites them, then, is working in the same type of institution. Further, they are interviewed at a time when they are taking part in the same pedagogical training programme and are thus acquainted with each other. It is probably easier to motivate them to take part in a group discussion than in an individual interview because in a group they are able to listen actively, compare experiences, gain fresh insights, discover links between things and even solve problems. A group discussion about collaboration practices and about the role they play in one's own work as a teacher can be perceived by the participants also as a form of on-the-job guidance (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Morgan, 1997).

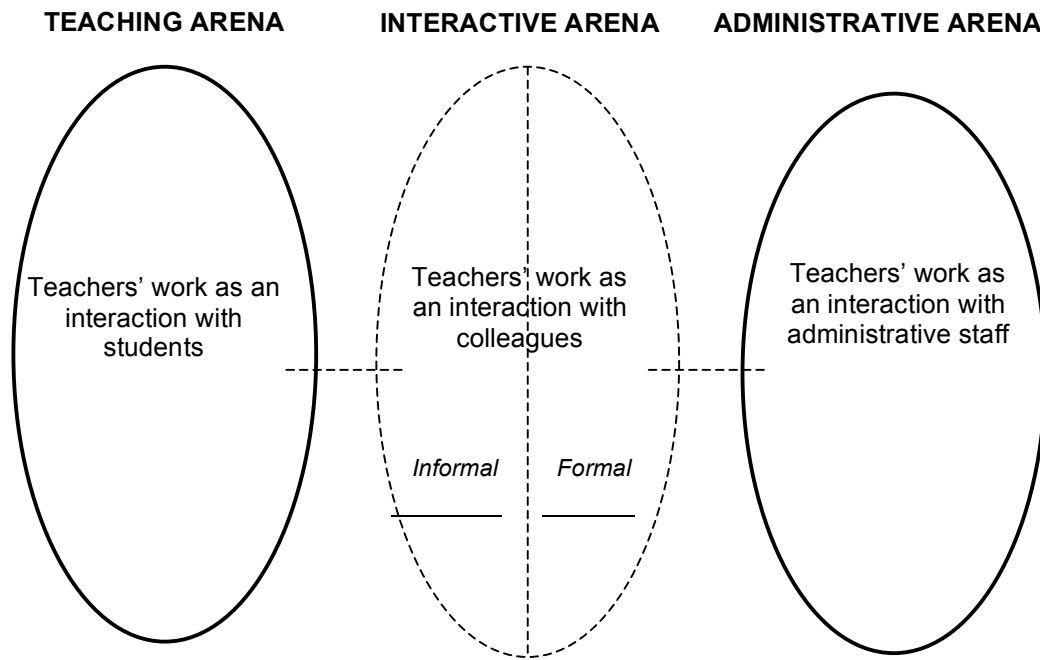
## RESULTS

The interview data from five group interviews have been analysed within a micropolitical framework of reference where the teachers' work is seen as taking place in three arenas: teaching, administration and interaction (see Table 1). Different arenas demand different forms of participation and different competencies. I analysed teachers' talk for manifestations of these arenas and their interplay.

In the polytechnic context, the *teaching arena* is dominated by the teacher's individual work, where the teachers emphasised autonomy and the pressure of work. Teachers must also manage by themselves in polytechnics. Autonomy is the cultural foundation of the teacher's work, serving as the basis for the emergence of different collaboration practices. It seems to be a norm of the teacher's work that one must not intervene unasked in another teacher's professional activities; this is a requirement that shapes everyday communication. New teachers were surprised by the loneliness under which they found themselves working.

The work done in the *administrative arena* is more distant from the core of teaching; it was discussed as a 'second' level of the teacher's work, where the focus was on reacting to the initiatives and policy definitions of the administration. From the teachers' perspective, it is a peripheral action field whose effect on their everyday activities is indirect.

**Table 1:** The Three Arenas of Teachers' Work



As Table 1 highlights, the *interactive arena* functions as a buffer zone between the administration and the teachers, reflecting the loose relationship between the arenas. The interaction arena brought together, on the one hand, a spontaneous and situational need, stemming from a teacher's work orientation for informal collaboration and the management of everyday professional life; and, on the other hand, efforts, stemming from administrative objectives, to organise, evaluate and anticipate the teacher's work in the longer term.

The *informal* collaboration, taking place around the teaching arena was grounded on a teacher's mastery and successful performance of their own basic tasks. Work orientation was dominated by thinking in terms of here and now, with collaboration arising without preliminary arrangements and in accordance with each teacher's particular needs.

*Formal* collaboration more closely related to the administrative arena, was a sphere of official and formal decision-making whose schedules and issues are more distant from the classroom. It is often organised separately as special meetings, and these meetings were considered important especially as channels of the general flow of information.

In conclusion, teachers' everyday life is dominated by the teaching arena, which is only loosely linked with the shared decision-making and management activities going on in the administrative arena. Interaction between the teaching arena and the administrative arena seems to form an important factor in the development of a work community's collaboration culture.

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## About the Author(s)

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### PASI SAVONMÄKI

*University of Jyväskylä, Finland*



Pasi Savonmäki is working as a researcher in the Institute for Educational Research at the University of Jyväskylä. He was lecturer for 12 years in Jyväskylä Polytechnic at the Vocational Teacher Education College before coming to the 'Life as Learning' research programme in 2003 to write his doctoral thesis. His current interests are collegiality and collaboration in teachers' work and school as a micropolitical organisation. The research programme is financed by the Academy of Finland for the period 2003-2006.

Pasi Savonmäki  
Institute for Educational Research  
University of Jyväskylä  
P.O. Box 35  
FIN-40014  
Finland  
[pasi.savonmaki@ktl.jyu.fi](mailto:pasi.savonmaki@ktl.jyu.fi)