Hawliyat is the official peer-reviewed journal of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Balamand. It publishes articles from the field of Humanities.

**Journal Name:** Hawliyat

**ISSN:** 1684-6605

**Title:** Collaborative Action Research as a Tool for Teachers’ Professional Development: A Study in a Private Lebanese University

**Authors:** Olga Fleonova

Giuseppe Tassone

**To cite this document:**


**Permanent link to this document:** DOI: https://doi.org/10.31377/haw.v17i0.68

Hawliyat uses the Creative Commons license CC BY-NC-SA that lets you remix, transform, and build upon the material for non-commercial purposes. However, any derivative work must be licensed under the same license as the original.
Collaborative Action Research as a Tool for Teachers’ Professional Development: 
A Study in a Private Lebanese University

Olga FLEONOVA, Giuseppe TASSONE

Introduction

Teacher professional development (PD) takes a variety of forms and has recently received great attention in literature. If we turn to Europe for “best practice”, while it is not required of teachers in higher education to have pedagogical training, many countries acknowledge the need to improve university teachers’ skills. Accordingly, they have introduced compulsory pedagogical training courses for university teachers (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne & Nevgi, 2008). In the absence of such courses, other PD alternatives can be used. Professional development workshops are a short, one-to-several day professional development practice. Brooker, Smeal, Ehrich, Daws and Brannock (1998) comment on the other alternatives to professional training and development: the innovation-focused and action research models. The first model of professional development implies learning from others, where specialists in the field offer expert knowledge, support and help in implementing new practices of teaching. In the second model, teachers use their own context to systematically examine it and generate solutions

(1) Olga Fleonova is Assistant Professor at the Department of English Language and Literature, University of Balamand. She previously taught at Moscow State University and China Agricultural University. She has published articles on the discursive construction of the Soviet state, power and solidarity in discourse, using simulations in English classes. Her research interests include learner-centered pedagogy, and teacher professional development. Giuseppe Tassone is Assistant Professor in Cultural Studies at the University of Balamand. His research interests center on the thought of Adorno and critical theory. He has recently expanded his interests to bring the metaphysical and theological discourses into historical materialism, especially through the works of Eagleton and Žižek. He has published articles on Adorno’s moral philosophy and social theory, on Karatani’s transcritique, on evil and democracy, and on the Arab revolution. He is currently involved in a book project on the philosophy of history.
to their classroom problems and issues. This research explores the use of collaborative action research (CAR) as a professional development tool (Bleicher, 2014; Savoie-Zajc & Descamps-Bednarz, 2007), where action research is grounded in the specific contextual problems of a certain classroom and the “outsider” works alongside the class teacher in order to find solutions to the class problems collaboratively.

This research started as a response to the frustration of a professor teaching in the Cultural Studies (CS) Program at a private university in Lebanon. He was disturbed by the inactivity of his students in class and their lack of interest in the subject in general. The teacher of CS (TCS) had no formal pedagogical education and turned to another teacher from the English Department (TE) in an attempt to learn some techniques to add variety to his teaching style, which consisted primarily of lectures and questions addressed to the students, and to enhance their interest in the subject. Thus, a collaborative action research project ensued, in which the two researchers endeavoured to introduce some active learning techniques in the CS classroom. The complexity of the research increased as it unfolded. So did the research questions. The initial research focus was formulated as:

1. What class activities can the teacher effectively use to increase students’ interest and participation in CS classes?
   As the collaborative action research progressed and went through the initial stage of critical reflection on the professional practice in order to identify the problem, there appeared a need for the second research question:

2. What other changes in the teaching practice and teaching philosophy need to be made to increase students’ participation in their own learning?
   The two researchers felt that collaborative action research was in this particular case an effective PD tool, as compared, for example, to action research done by a practitioner solely on his/her own. Thus, the initial research interest was supplemented by the investigation of the role of the collaborative mode of research in the change:

3. What are the advantages of CAR for professional development as compared to a practitioner’s action research conducted on his/her own?
Collaborative action research preserves the main purpose of action research—combining research and action to produce change in a particular context. In a typical model of collaborative action research, “people with an expertise in the process of research ... collaborate with ... practitioners, who have an expertise in and knowledge of a particular form of practice or of a particular practical setting” (Townsend, 2014, p. 117). Co-researchers, playing different roles in the context and/or coming from different cultures of practice, benefit from “an exchange of complementary knowledge and skills” (ibid.). Creating knowledge in CAR is a shared collective activity. The co-creation of knowledge in CAR is viewed “as an alternative to more centralized models of knowledge generation and use” which can be forced upon others without negotiation, as for example in mandated policy initiatives (ibid., pp. 117-118). Thus, CAR, which respects “the independence, expertise and knowledge of collaborators”, is a more democratic form of social change (ibid., p. 118).

The advantages of collaboration, aside from the effect of “combined thinking forces” and shared expertise, is that collaboration allows to question assumptions which often form the basis for teachers’ actions in class: it is often “very difficult for teachers to adopt a critical stance about their work and practice, particularly when what is to be viewed afresh is something that has been instilled as common sense” (Brooker et al, p. 1991). The joint reflection of the “insider” and the “outsider” can produce deeper insights into the classroom practice, since “one’s own perspective is partial and local” (Phillips, 2011, p. 86). Knowledge construction through collaborative reflection is enriched by the perspectives of others.

CAR presents some challenges specific to this research. The power differential between the collaborators may affect the power balance between them (Townsend, 2014). The power balance can be also affected by the positioning of one of the researchers as the “knower”, “expert”, and the other one as “follower” (Wallace, 1998; Yuan & Mak,
Another challenge involves mediating different agendas and expectations of the participant researchers regarding the shared action research. While some researchers might be interested in improving their practice, the others might be interested in publication to advance their careers and enhance their social positions (Townsend, 2014). In all the cases, “[t]he challenge is to establish and maintain equitable relationships between collaborators and to mitigate the effects of any disparity of power on the conduct of action research and on the development of the mutually beneficial shared change” (Townsend, 2014, p. 119).

While some researchers report on a smooth process of collaborative research without tensions between its participants (Paulus, Woodside & Ziegler, 2010), others argue that no account of collaboration is complete without taking into consideration conflict and tensions (Creamer, 2004; Phillips, 2011). Ideals in collaborative “humanities-based research about the co-production of knowledge among equals are difficult to live up to in the concrete meeting between different knowledge forms, interests and wishes as to the research outcome” (Phillips, 2011, p. 87).

2. Active learning

It is widely recognized that classes at the college or university level can be excessively teacher-centred, which works against students becoming successful, mature and self-regulated learners and thinkers (Weimer, 2013). Many instructors recognize this and try to make their practice more student centred (Wright, 2011).

The main focus of discussion regarding the teacher-centred, or teacher-driven learning, and the learner-centred, or active learning, is the nature of knowledge and the process of the construction of knowledge. The two approaches differ, according to Weimer (2013), along the following lines: (1) the role of the teacher; (2) the balance of power in the classroom; (3) the function of the course content; (4) the responsibility for learning; and (5) the purpose and processes of evaluation.

In a teacher-centred classroom, teaching is seen primarily as the transmission of knowledge where the main focus is on the content being taught. Teachers are the ones who select and organize the content in a way that is easier, in their opinion, for students to understand, determine
what needs to be learned and the conditions for learning, make all the decisions related to assessment, and try it all out on the students. In a word, in a teacher-centred classroom it is the teachers who are active; the focus is on what teachers should do rather than on what students should do.

Students are the receivers of information and teacher directives, and often do not seem to mind this role. Years and years of teacher-centred classrooms have produced students who have “little or no commitment to learning, [...] unable to function without structure and imposed control” (Weimer, 2013, p. 146). Teachers “give in” to the situation they themselves have produced and make adjustments to their courses to suit students used to passivity.

On the other hand, teachers who promote active learning in student-centred classrooms “see teaching as facilitating students’ learning or students’ knowledge-construction processes, or as supporting students’ conceptual change. These teachers focus on what students do in terms of their efforts to activate their existing conceptions, or encouraging them to construct their own knowledge and understanding” (Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi & Ashwin, 2006, p. 286). The responsibility for learning shifts in such circumstances to students.

Shifting to active learning is often met with resistance by students, teachers and administrators. The new experience is perceived by all the stakeholders as unsettling and threatening (Weimer, 2013). However, different patterns of teaching have been identified and associated with the disciplines taught, as a consequence of differences in the knowledge structures. Lueddeke (2003) observes that a teacher-centred approach is more likely to be found among teachers who teach “hard” disciplines, such as physics, engineering and medicine, whereas in “soft” disciplines, such as social sciences and humanities, the student-centred approach is more common.

3. Teachers’ beliefs and assumptions

Research has been conducted to explore the link between instructional practices and teachers’ beliefs and assumptions (Basturkmen, 2012; Farrell & Ives, 2015). Teachers’ beliefs “influence
how the teacher orchestrates the interaction between learner, teacher, and subject matter in a particular classroom context with particular resources” (Thwaite, as cited in Farrell & Ives, 2015, p. 595). Teacher beliefs also play an important role in teacher professional development. Donaghue (2003) states that “[t]eachers’ beliefs influence the acceptance and uptake of new approaches, techniques, and activities” (p. 344). She observes that teachers on teacher development courses will be unable to assimilate new instructional activities unless they share the same beliefs and assumptions as the trainer. She emphasizes the importance of uncovering teachers’ beliefs, assumptions and personal theories about teaching in order to enable critical reflection. Only then development and change can occur.

The study

The action research cycles in this study correspond to the ones proposed by Denscombe (as cited in Costello, 2011). Professional practice is critically reflected upon and the problem that needs attention and research is identified. Rigorous enquiry into the practices and resulting findings form the basis for the action. The action is implemented to improve professional practice, reflected upon, and then the reflective cycle is repeated where changes are critically reflected upon and evaluated, and further research and plans of action are developed (Figure 1). During all the cycles of research, the researchers constantly referred to literature for evidence of best practice, for clarifying concepts, for theoretical and practical developments in active learning and learning-centred education, and for collaborative action research.
In view of the fact that knowledge in CAR is constructed collaboratively, the two researchers held regular collective reflection sessions. Meaning-making was dialogic and emergent. Different views on the same classroom occurrence generated a discussion of what happened and how to view it, and a joint decision on how to proceed further was taken. Tensions between TCS and TE, primarily resulting from their different beliefs concerning the background of the students, their critical thinking ability, the type of classroom activities leading to successful acquisition of knowledge, and informed by their teaching experience in Lebanon or elsewhere, were viewed positively as an integral part of co-construction of knowledge.
Context and participants

The Lebanese education system is a product of complex cultural, religious and socio-political factors (Bacha & Bahous, 2011; Zakharia, 2011). Foreign languages, English and French, coexist with Arabic, the native tongue, both at the school and university levels. At schools, private or public, the languages of instruction are Arabic, and either English or French (depending on the school’s choice). Both Arabic and a second language of instruction are allotted equal time in the curriculum. Arabic is reserved for humanities and social sciences, while either of the two foreign languages is used in the mathematics and sciences classes. A third language (English or French) is taught as a subject. Lebanon has one public university, where Arabic and French are mainly used, and more than 30 private universities where the medium of instruction is either French or English (MEHE, 2016). A detailed overview of the Lebanese language-in-education legislation, the linguistic, cultural and curricular complexities of the Lebanese education system, and the ideological underpinnings and consequences of this trilingual system, can be found in Bacha and Bahous (2011) and Zakharia (2011).

As for the teaching/learning culture in Lebanon, “[t]he school environment in both public and private schools is characterized by the dominance of teacher-centred teaching approaches” (Lebanese Association for Educational Studies, 2006, p. 17). Universities inherit students produced by such a system. Rather than engaging with original sources, like philosophical texts for example, and searching for answers, the majority of students expect and prefer “second-hand” information, that is, information prepared by the teacher in a concise form conveniently packaged for memorizing and passing exams. There is, however, a positive attitude among university teachers and students majoring in education towards introducing active learning in Lebanese classrooms (Daouk, Bahous, & Bacha, 2016), which might eventually bring about changes for a more learner-centred classroom culture in Lebanon.

This study was conducted in a private university in Lebanon where the medium of instruction in most departments is English. Like other similar institutions, it is modelled on the American university system. Two English courses required by the university prepare students to function in the academic environment. Students whose English
proficiency is insufficient for coping with academic course work usually take remedial and/or freshman English courses. A few departments like, for example, the Department of Physical Education, the Department of Education, and the Fine Arts School, offer programs in French.

All major private universities in Lebanon require students to take humanities courses to complete their degree. In the institution where the study was conducted the Cultural Studies Program is part of the university general education. After having met the language requirements, students take three or four CS courses in English, or French (the number of courses and language of instruction depend on their study plan). They also have a choice of taking one of the CS courses in Arabic. The CS curriculum requires that students become acquainted with some foundational philosophical texts. Students are often heard complaining about being forced to take “useless” CS classes. Many of them prefer to focus on their major courses only.

Both participants brought with them to the research their expertise in their respective fields. TE had experience with group work and active learning in a skills-based EFL (English as a Foreign Language) class. TCS, on the other hand, had taught the CS classes at this university for several years and had an in-depth knowledge of the context. Both researchers were committed to the principles of critical pedagogy, viewing education as a tool of student empowerment and emancipation through fostering their critical thinking, first within the discipline and later translated into life-long learning skills.

The teacher training background of the two researchers was very different. TCS had a degree in philosophy and a PhD in political philosophy obtained from two European universities. These degrees allowed graduates to teach at a university level. The programs for those degrees did not include any teacher-training courses. At the beginning of his teaching career while a PhD student, he had some brief, three-session pedagogical coaching by a university-appointed mentor. The mentor discussed with his supervisee the course content and advised him not to waste too much time on preparing tutorials, but to focus more on his own research. During his twenty years of teaching in European universities and later on in a Lebanese one, TCS imitated the lecturing and seminar style of teaching he was exposed to as a student, that is, he learnt his skill through “apprenticeship”. Seeing the limitations of the
style, he referred to Internet websites for some tips on how to create conditions for students to learn from each other or from other sources of information offered by modern technology. As a result, he became more aware of alternatives to lecturing and seminar discussion, yet continued with his habitual teaching method. The CS coordination meetings at the university where the study was conducted focused primarily on course content. During one of the retreats, there was general agreement among the CS instructors that classes should become less lecture-based and more learner-centred, which could be achieved by introducing a variety of teaching materials. However, there was no institutional mechanism to ensure the implementation of this initiative, and there is no evidence that the classes by and large did not remain lecture-based.

TE had a degree in English language teaching with teacher training courses, both theoretical and practical, constituting the core of the curriculum. She later obtained a PhD in Linguistics. Both degrees were from two universities in Europe. TE had taught EFL and linguistics courses for over twenty years. She also taught theoretical courses and a practicum at a Master’s program in English Language Teaching in Lebanon. The professional culture in the English Department of that university provided varied opportunities for professional development through regular coordination meetings, workshops, collaborative development of new courses and materials, and norming sessions. Mentoring trainee teachers proved to be an opportunity for professional growth as well (Nicolas, 2015).

The other participants were students taking Cultural Studies courses. A class of 19 students was observed; 18 of them filled out the questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained from the students prior to the research.

Data collection and analysis

The data for the study was gathered from the observations of the TCS’s classes by TE, diaries of TCS, and reflective dialogues of the two researchers prior, during and after the interventions. A student questionnaire was administered during the third cycle.
**Observations** Seven observations of the TCS's classes were conducted by TE, during which she took notes. Two observations were planned prior to the interventions in order to explore the TCS's teaching practices and find appropriate activities to incorporate into the course. The other five observations took place during the three cycles of the research with the purpose of documenting the change in the teacher's instructional practices and students' reactions to the change.

**TCS diaries** Throughout the study, TCS wrote nine diary entries ranging in length from one paragraph to three pages. The focus for each diary entry was suggested by TE. TCS was asked to record and reflect on the classroom dynamics, his teaching philosophy, the role of the teacher in class, and his reflections on the effectiveness of the interventions.

**Collaborative reflections of the two researchers** Reflective conversations of the two researchers were used as empirical material for this research. Thirteen conversations lasting from 10 to 60 minutes took place throughout the study: prior, during and after the implemented changes. TE was taking detailed notes during the reflective dialogues.

**Questionnaire** The questionnaire asked the students to compare the teacher-led class with the group-work based class.

The qualitative data were analysed inductively. The observation transcripts, teacher diaries, the transcripts of the reflective dialogues, and the qualitative part of the student questionnaire were reread several times to segment the data and identify the emerging themes related to the assumptions, expectations of the intervention, effectiveness of the intervention, and the collaborative research experiences. The frequency of the students' instructional preferences expressed in the questionnaire was counted for comparison.

**Research findings**

Since this collaborative research included the voices of two researchers, and it started with the researchers' diverging convictions and expectations, this part is structured in a manner as to reflect the opinions, assumptions, and expectations of both researchers. Tensions, conflicting statements, expectations, interpretations were crucial for the
collaborative meaning-making process. Meaning was collaboratively constructed at the juncture of two interpretations of experience and is thus emergent.

**Planning stage: Investigating the practice**

1. **Classroom practice**

   During the observations, TCS appeared as a very animated and skilful teacher who developed effective shortcuts to explain the subject matter to the students, even when they came to class unprepared, *i.e.*, not having read the assigned text. He used quotes from the text around which to centre class discussions and involved students in the discussion through questions. Whenever possible, he related the philosophical statements to students’ knowledge or life experience. At the end of the session the teacher provided the summary of his explanation and the discussion. It was obvious that the students understood the material because they were able to answer the teacher’s questions and their answers were to the point. At the end of one of the CS classes, TE asked permission of one actively-participating student to photocopy her class notes to see whether she had been able to do so effectively. The accuracy of her notes provided proof that the material had been made accessible to the students.

   What can be wrong with that? How come students, in TCS’s opinion, were not involved in the “beauty of thought” at their disposal? The observations confirmed that the approach to the TCS’s professional development would not be one of “covering up the gaps” in his pedagogy, since his approach seemed to work, but one of expanding his arsenal of techniques, one of growth, one of reframing his understanding of teaching and learning.

   During the observations, TE also focused on the amount of teacher talking time (TTT) and student talking time (STT), the type of questions used by the teacher and the type of answers produced by the students, the variety of activities, the class routine and the students’ non-verbal behavior.
The class routine during the first observation (the teacher selecting a quote from the text, reading it aloud, asking the students questions, listening to the students’ answers, providing philosophical comments and explanations—all that repeated three times, and giving a summary at the end of the class) did not leave much room for students’ contributions. Although the students’ answers were correct, they consisted of just a few words. TTT dominated in class. The questions checked the students’ understanding of the teacher’s explanation, rather than making them search for the meaning themselves. After about 45 minutes of listening to the lecture, there appeared observable signs of tiredness and a decrease in attention (stretching, yawning, looking through the window, closing eyes, etc.) Only the five students in the front row (out of 12 present in class) continued participating and taking notes.

2. CS teacher’s beliefs

Important insights into the classroom practice can be obtained not only from the observable classroom behavior of the teacher and the students, but also from the investigation of the beliefs and assumptions that the teacher has about the learning process and that govern his decision-making in instructional choices. Collaborative reflections and TCS’s diaries revealed TCS’s beliefs that shaped his teaching in this particular context. Having moved to a Lebanese university from a European university, TCS switched entirely to lecturing, counter to a combination of lecture-seminar instruction by means of which he himself had been introduced to philosophical thought and argument-development skills. His instructional choices were shaped by the impressions grounded in his own learning experience, his perception of the course constraints, and his judgement regarding what students were capable of doing in a CS class. Students coping with the course content were his major concern.

2.1 Beliefs related to TCS’ own learning experience as a student:

TCS was educated in a teacher-centred classroom and it worked well for him: “Lectures worked for me; they should work for others. I enjoyed lectures; they were inspiring; I wanted to know more and would go to the library after a lecture to read more”.

2.2 TCS’s perceptions regarding the course constraints:

The pace of work, the coverage of the content and the source of knowledge were the teacher’s main concerns: the material should be “covered” in due time by all means. Although the coordinator of the CS courses welcomed the research, he cautioned the teacher that the study should not interfere with the pace of the courses and the coverage of the material. Lecturing in this case was the most effective and fastest way to get the students through the course without loss in content, time and knowledge coherence. The CS teacher assumed that delegating some tasks and activities to the students would slow down the pace of the course or perhaps even subvert the whole teaching-learning process. The source of the knowledge and the complexity of the primary source material were also an issue. As he put it “The knowledge should come from the text only, and not from what students think or believe. The primary texts used in the course cannot be comprehended by the students without the teacher’s explanations; they are complex philosophical texts, some of which date back to the 17th century; they require appropriate background”.

2.3 TCS’s beliefs regarding the role of the CS classes:

According to the teacher, “CS is not the place to teach students how to discuss texts and analyse them; they should learn this at school. Developing the students’ skills is insufficient; the course should provide them with the analytical and critical tools to understand the world”.

2.4 TCS’s beliefs regarding what his students were capable of doing in class:

“The main problem is that students do not read the assigned texts at home and because of that are unable to participate in classroom discussion. Group work will be counterproductive because students will come to class, as usual, unprepared, thus unable to work with the text on their own”. (There was a shared belief among the teachers at that university that students come from a non-reading culture; this “cultural trait” appeared as anecdotal evidence in conversations between the teaching colleagues).
3. Beliefs brought to the research by TE

TE brought her own beliefs to the research, based on her teaching experience. Her main concern was creating a learner-centred environment in which students could acquire skills for independent self-regulated learning. Their EFL background should be taken into consideration:

3.1 The teacher-centered classroom works well with the Lebanese students because of their previous school experience, yet it was worth experimenting with a more learner-centered environment. Student agency in a content-based course should be considered. Well-organized group work should work in all contexts. The students, however, might not like the activities where they are required to work actively rather than just passively listen to the teacher. The teacher's instructional choices should not be dictated by the students since they have a limited experience and would stick to the familiar.

3.2 By just listening to the teacher, students will never acquire the skills required for analyzing philosophical texts. They will not produce a good analysis during the exam when forced by the circumstances to work on their own. They need practice in analyzing these texts orally and in writing. Such opportunities must be created in the classroom.

3.3 Students were taking CS classes in an EFL environment, and hence additional difficulties they encountered in reading and understanding the assigned texts were language difficulties. These impediments might have contributed to the students' inactivity in class.

3.4 The enthusiasm for the course that TCS felt as a student was not automatically shared by his students because of the differences in context. As a student, TCS took such courses "voluntarily" as part of his major. By contrasts, his students were "forced" to take these courses as their general education university courses. As a consequence, they were not surrounded by intrinsically-motivated students.
There was an obvious difference in the researchers’ beliefs and assumptions. The researchers had to agree on a common course of action. TE noted that TCS was “too helpful” in class out of his best intentions to make the course easier for the students. TE believed activities should be introduced in class which would create conditions for shifting the responsibility for learning to students. She had a positive experience with group work in her classes and was confident that the change would work no matter what the context was. TCS, on the other hand, knew well the constraints of his humanities course and the institution, which was the source of his concern.

At this point in the research, TCS started expressing scepticism and fear of change: “I feel tense. I need to do some violence on myself. My students will be stolen from me; my work hijacked ... I am scared. I’ve created a comfort zone for myself, now I need to leave it. I need to give up some of my expectations. I have no clear picture how to implement these changes; students might take over, might steer out of control”.

One of the reasons for reluctance to implement the change was TCS’s misconception of “group work”. It was clarified during the reflective dialogues that “group work” did not mean “working without the teacher”.

Both researchers understood that TCS’s beliefs and assumptions were the source of his disbelief, scepticism and resistance. Reflective dialogues addressed these concerns. Moving on with research meant making sense of the collected data and jointly constructing a common ground for further action. Both researchers shared willingness to experiment with group work, taking into consideration the course constraints: the time allocated in the syllabus for certain content, the learning outcomes and exam requirements.

The reflective dialogues and the TCS’s diary entries at this time started revolving around issues other than a mere search for activities to break the classroom routine and generate student interest. Teaching philosophy, the conceptions of learning and teaching, teachers’ assumptions, students’ attitudes and student agency, became prominent points of discussion.
Cycle 1

After the baseline data regarding the TCS’s teaching practice and beliefs were collected, the course syllabus was examined to find the appropriate space to experiment with a new instructional activity with the least disruption to the pace of the course and the learning outcomes. To introduce variety to the classroom, a guided discussion in small groups was designed as a supplement to the lecture-based instruction. TCS would habitually explain the play *Life of Galileo* by Bertold Brecht to the students, point out the relevant quotes, read them aloud himself, prepare questions to generate some discussion in class, and summarize the discussion at the end of the class. The second lesson dealing with the play was collaboratively redesigned: a lecture was replaced by a task sheet with questions on which the students were expected to work in groups. Each group was then to report to the rest of the class their analysis of the assigned scenes.

During the group discussions, TCS assumed the new role of a facilitator and circulated around class helping students to formulate their ideas. TE performed the role of participant-observer this time and joined one group for discussion on equal terms with the students. It was planned as a facilitation move since the students were not used to such classroom activity, which was perceived by the researchers as a potential obstacle to administering it. TE took observation notes while participating in the discussion with her group.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the activity, the TE observation notes were used as well as the TSC diary reflection on the new activity. All this was followed by a collaborative reflection.

The perceptions of the two researchers of the first intervention were completely different. While TE perceived the intervention as “a great success”, TCS considered it “a total failure”.

For TE, students were more exposed when arranged in groups and had to participate in group discussions. As compared to the teacher’s habitual question-answer routine, STT increased significantly during group work. It was students who searched for answers and acquired and imparted knowledge. She believed that after a series of such activities, the students would manage to deal with a similar activity on
their own during a test or exam. She did acknowledge that the students’ presentations of their scenes to the rest of the class were incoherent. The other students could not easily draw any meaningful conclusions from those explanations. That problem, in her opinion, should be dealt with at the next stage and was a matter of practice.

In TCS’s view, the quality of instruction suffered dramatically. The summaries produced by the groups and presented to the rest of the class lacked depth. They were not contextualized. The political, social and philosophical background to the play went missing: “Their descriptions are pathetic; they struggle to present the play in a systematic way ... there is no coherence in their presentations”. “They haven’t done the reading. At best, they have grasped the scenes the read for their presentations, not the other scenes. Those who analysed only scenes 8 and 9 will not know the other scenes”. TCS’s uneasiness with the research was predominant at this stage: “I won’t be in my own element. I’m skeptical ... difficult to accept that the students might not gain the amount of knowledge I expect. Knowledge that doesn’t come from me is not reliable”. “It’s not an issue of trust. I don’t believe in your methodology. I feel that you don’t know my problems. I have to deal with content”.

Collaborative conversations aimed at reconciling the two divergent points of view to create a common understanding of the situation and plan the next stage.

**Cycle 2**

TCS on his own initiative continued using the same activity with the other sections, and continued using group work over the next several sessions when the students needed to read the following chapters from *Life of Galileo*. He reported some adjustments that he had made on the way: he had formulated more focused questions about the context and helped the students with the summary when they were reporting to class so that the rest of the class could take coherent notes.

Cycle 2 can be characterized as the fine-tuning stage. The task sheets were “perfected” to better aid the students through their own
discoveries. Yet, the perceptions of TCS regarding the effectiveness of the introduced activity did not change, as he explained: “Now we have a variety of activities in class. However, a simple, mechanical implementation of activities does not lead to a desirable effect in class”... “What’s the difference? I end up doing the same job, but within groups. It was more productive before”... “It wasn’t successful, there were too many gaps in their knowledge”... “I feel uneasy because I didn’t convey enough knowledge today”... “It’s bad for the good students, but good for the bad students... The good students place themselves as teachers and help the weak ones. They spend time to illuminate others rather than to illuminate themselves”. On the other hand, TE remained hopeful. To her mind, the organization of the activity needed fine-tuning. The trial of the activity helped to see what responsibilities for learning could be delegated to students, and where the teacher’s help was needed. The researchers continued their dialogues about student empowerment and their search for activities leading to it.

Cycle 3

Cycle 3 was the stage when the instructional change started producing changes in the classroom atmosphere, in students’ attitudes in class, in their new more self-regulated work practices, and TCS’s perception. TCS’s diary documents the change in minute detail:

The class was successful. The students turned up quite well prepared, all aware of what is expected of them. It seems that they have changed their attitude towards their work and become ready to take on new responsibilities. Before they were passive listeners, now they understand that they have to take the initiative to read and interpret the text through their own group activities. I was particularly impressed by the natural and spontaneous way in which they moved from each stage of the class work to the next. They arrived and sat all together, gathered in a small section of the room (before they used to be scattered across the whole room, many of them isolated towards the back) ... One student volunteered, with no hesitation, to stand at the whiteboard and present the scene they had read in the previous class. Then they quickly formed the groups as if they had already in their minds who they were going to be with. And after 5-10 minutes of silence to read the texts they
had been assigned, they called me for assistance. Their questions were insightful. They seem to know now how they are expected to carry out their interpretive work. Their questions are better focused than before, they no longer hang in a vacuum but seem to be guided by a sense of direction. And when I produce the missing link – the missing piece of information – they immediately add it to the chain and declare that their work is done.

Group work activities started yielding results, and answers were provided to the probes articulated in research questions 1 and 2. Accustomed to the new routine and requirements, students became more active and demonstrated analytical abilities that TCS doubted they had. The following factors were believed to effect the change: (a) students’ feeling of self-empowerment at being invested with learning responsibilities; (b) a sense of pride among the students at discovering the meaning of the texts by themselves; (c) a sense of self-fulfillment at being engaged with a true intellectual activity; and (d) a sense of excitement in participating as equal partners in a common enterprise. The second class showed more resistance to the change:

Not all classes, though, have gone thus far and made the same progress. Earlier in the morning, things were not so smooth. Several students had no books and provided no contribution whatsoever to their group activity. Others read a text from another course. No one volunteered for presentation. And only when I expressed my frustration by moving on to the next scene with no presentation, some got scared and exhibited a better commitment. But tensions arose among them. The leader of a group refused to write down the answers for presentation, complaining that it was the turn of somebody else to take on the task. The class was flat and there was a sense of general apathy.

This incident corroborated Weimer’s (2013) conclusions that the process of shifting to more active learning classrooms would not be smooth. She provides some common sources of student resistance: reluctance to do more work which learner-centred approaches require; fear of being outside their comfort zone; feeling threatened by unfamiliar tasks and expectations: “classrooms where teachers make all the decisions are safer, simpler places” (p. 204)); unpreparedness of some students for learner-centred approaches. Weimer asserts that the realization by the teacher that students’ open or passive non-verbal
Collaborative Action Research as a Tool for Teachers’ Professional Development

The two researchers found it important to add the students’ perspective on the changes occurring in class. A questionnaire was administered to investigate the students’ perceptions regarding the newly-introduced group activity. Students were asked to compare their lecture-based and group-work-based lessons. The numerical analysis revealed that out of the 18 students who took the questionnaire, the majority of the students, eight, perceived group work as more beneficial for them for understanding the assigned chapters from *Life of Galileo*. Four students preferred the teacher’s explanation. Six students reported that a combination of both strategies worked well for them. When asked what approach they preferred, the number of students who chose group work rose to eleven. The same four students preferred teacher-led discussions. Three students opted for both. However, fewer students, six, believed that group work would work for more complex philosophical texts, like the texts by Kant. A combination of the teacher’s explanation and group work was perceived by the majority, nine students, as an effective way of dealing with such texts. Again, only a minority, three students, preferred the teacher as the sole source of information about the text.

The quotes in support of the teacher’s lecturing emphasized the clarity of the teacher’s explanation, the value of the summary of the ideas provided by the teacher, and the convenience of taking notes. The students’ contributions were not viewed as beneficial and worthwhile: “Sometimes students’ explanations are not as effective as those of the teacher. He knows than the students and can explain the ideas more clearly” (Student 14).

The students favoring group work appreciated being forced by the new circumstances to read the text, work and participate in group work: “When we weren’t allowed to rely on the teacher, we learned more by reading the text ourselves and giving our own analysis” (Student 17); “It gives students more time to think for themselves and share ideas rather than spending the entire class listening” (Student 1); “We as students are forced [when put in groups], to read the story. When the professor is talking and we are taking notes, we might be lazy and don’t
read the assigned story” (Student 16). Two students commented that they felt more “involved in the course” (Student 18) and “integrated in the meaning of the course” (Student 2). Several students felt that it improved the quality of their learning: “It is a better way to remember the scenes and what happened in them” (Student 5); “When you do something, you understand it more” (Student 10).

During the researchers’ discussion of the results of the questionnaire, it was obvious that TE favoured the students’ quotes in support of group work, whereas TCS leaned towards students’ more benevolent comments about his lectures. The respective quotes were perceived by the researchers as confirmation of the effectiveness of their preferred teaching practices. Both researchers maintained their instructional preferences.

The last reflective diary entry of the CS teacher sums up his final, rejectionist verdict of the experiment. Although the new instructional practice was perceived as a successful activity, it did not conform in his view to his teaching philosophy and conception of learning. It was thus not internalized as a tool for professional development.

On the one hand, I am committed to critical pedagogy, that is, to the idea of education as an instrument of social and cultural emancipation, an idea that I have tried to foster in my text-centred classroom through in-depth analysis of the main works of the modern philosophical tradition. On the other hand, the new method of teaching enhances students’ skills and helps them take an active role in the process of generating knowledge. But such skills maintain an instrumental approach to the classroom work. The practice of teaching is now broken down into several constituent parts, and each of them is over-analysed in order to produce a certain intended outcome (how do students understand the context? how do they identify the key passages of the text? how is every student going to be involved in the interpretive work?) The students understand the skills they develop as tools to pass the exam and probably cope with the job market once they leave the university. But the sense of the whole text is lost. The focus is on skills, not on knowledge. The content of knowledge is relegated to the background. The classroom does not become the stepping stone to go on reading more books or make philosophy a corpus of knowledge necessary to better understand the world. The two methods seem to be incommensurable. In the learner-centred system, the assumption seems to be that technique generates knowledge; in my approach, it is knowledge that generates the technique, and the way to move on is for the students to be exposed to more and more sources of knowledge, both in the classroom and outside.
Cycle 3 ended with inconclusive results regarding TCS’s willingness to add group work to his arsenal of instructional tools. Although open for change and having initiated the change, TCS did not see group work as suitable for his classroom. During the semester following the research, TCS did not utilize group work at all. It was not until two semesters after the collaborative research that TCS added group work to the regular arsenal of his instructional methods as an effective teaching and learning tool.

Conclusions

Research Question 1: What class activities can the teacher effectively use to increase students’ interest and participation in CS classes?

This research did not generate measurable empirical proof that the designed group activities enhanced students’ learning. The assessment of the effectiveness of the new activities was based on the two researchers’ and the students’ perceptions. The research, however, documented the change in the TCS’s assumptions concerning the use of group work and the students’ attitudes towards this change. Group work was eventually accepted by the teacher as an effective strategy in the CS classroom. It helped address the TCS’s initial concern regarding students’ passivity and indolence. The researchers observed that the task itself assigned the students a more active role in class: it was no longer the teacher appealing to the students to read the text, but the situation itself that exposed the students to the sheer presence of the text and forced them to realize that the production of knowledge in the group depended on their own contribution. Thus, the assignment design plays an important role in changing the classroom culture. The majority of the students responded positively to the change in class practice and accepted their new active role in the learning process.

However, it was observed by the researchers and the students that group work should be fine-tuned and administered in a more effective way: instructions should be written with more awareness of the student background; more precise questions regarding the context of the philosophical text should be included in the group task-sheet; the
group presentations should be supplemented by the teacher’s summary so that the class could take coherent notes on the content discussed; and it should be carefully considered how to turn sessions dealing with complex philosophical works into active learning classrooms. More importantly, students need to be taught to work cooperatively—a move from mere working in groups to group work based on cooperative principles where meaning is co-constructed by all the group members for better learning outcomes.

**Research Question 2: What other changes in the teaching practice and teaching philosophy need to be made to increase students’ participation in their own learning?**

Teacher professional development limited to a mere search for activities to introduce instructional variety in class proves to be “incomplete”. Reconsideration by the TCS of these beliefs and teaching approach came as a natural, though painful, part of the process. Questions such as “What is knowledge?”, “How is it transmitted?”, or “How is it constructed?” accompanied the change. Parallel to the issue of introducing a variety of tasks and activities in the classroom, there emerged the teacher’s deeper understanding of the learning process in the discipline, the humanities, his reconsideration of his own potential as a teacher, as well as the change of his assumptions about the context along with the change of the students’ attitude to learning. Addressing teachers’ assumptions and beliefs is an important element in professional development. The “retooling” of the teacher’s instructional repertoire occurs alongside reframing his/her teaching philosophy. This might be a long-term process.

**Research Question 3: What are the advantages of CAR for professional development as compared to a practitioner’s action research conducted on his/her own?**

Collaborative action research as a mode of inquiry allowed a more insightful analysis of the collected data and more informed decisions about changes in instructional practice. The constructive dialogue
between two different positions as to how to perceive classroom reality, how to address teachers’ beliefs, how to evaluate the outcomes of the instructional change, and how to proceed, allowed a greater variety of situational factors and constraints to be taken into consideration, and at the same time made it possible for the positive results of employing group work in the CS class to be given due attention. Knowledge production occurs not only from empirical materials, but also from collaborative dialogues. Individual ideas becoming collective ideas, with further development, raise individual contributions to a new level of conceptual thinking (Paulus et al., 2010).

According to both researchers, collaborative action research, chosen as a research tool to deal with a specific learning situation, proved to be an effective strategy enhancing TCS’s professional development and exhibiting the potential of transforming his teaching practice into a more active learning-oriented one. This, however, was a delayed conclusion, as reflections after Cycle 3 show. The research itself ended with inconclusive results in relation to the transforming of TCS’s instructional practice into a more learner-centred one. Changes in instructional practices involve deeper changes in the teacher’s beliefs and teaching philosophy (which corroborates the findings of Donaghue (2003), and thus teacher professional development might not ensue immediately. It might require a longer period of time (three semesters in the case of the present research) for the teacher to internalize the new instructional approaches and be persuaded by their effectiveness for student learning.

The two researchers revised their “prejudices” and opened up to new perspectives. They developed a deeper understanding of the process of introducing new instructional practices in class, especially ones which differ radically from those which the teacher already employs. This process should not be technocratic and should be context sensitive. The class teacher’s perspective should have primacy over all other agents in the process of instructional decision-making, since no one knows the specific situation of the classroom better than him/her. Adjusting to the context factors can turn into “giving in” to contextual factors at the time when the teacher should act as a leader of change.
The researchers also learnt that collaborative action research is a sensitive process where emotions and fears are involved. One participant was forced by the research to leave his comfort zone and find himself in a vulnerable position, emotionally and professionally.

As well as gaining pedagogically from this CAR project, the researchers were made aware of the challenges of collaborative meaning-making, the tensions that can arise in the process of collaboration, issues of power relations between collaborating researchers, and the role of different teachers’ perceptions.

Limitations and further research

This research was carried out to aid the professional development of one teacher. The findings are limited to one CS class and teacher, and are not meant to be generalized to other sections of the CS Program in the host institution. Further research may focus on searching for other tasks to encourage active learning in CS classes.

While the present research confirmed the student engagement in and preference for group work as an element of active learning, more research could be conducted to assess students’ academic performance in classes with active learning activities as compared to lecture-based classes. Further research might also be conducted involving more CS teachers in collaborative action research as a professional development strategy.
References


Yuan, R., & Mak, P. (2016). Navigating the challenges arising from university-school collaborative action research. ELT Journal. doi: 10.1093/elt/ccw017

Abstract

Collaborative action research (CAR) is gaining currency as a teacher professional development strategy. This paper reports on the collaborative action research undertaken by two university teachers from different disciplines: a teacher of English and a teacher of Cultural Studies (CS) aiming to introduce a greater variety of activities in a predominantly lecture-based CS classroom and increase student involvement in class through the employment of active learning techniques. In addition to its main focus, the research brought to light the importance of taking into consideration such aspects peculiar to CAR as challenges of collaborative meaning-making, tensions arising in the process of collaboration, power relations between the researchers, and the role of differing teachers’ perceptions. Observations, teacher diaries, transcripts of reflective dialogues of the two researchers, and student questionnaires were used to document and analyse the classroom practice and the outcomes of the instructional changes. The research shows that professional development cannot be reduced to the use of new instructional techniques in class. Changes in instructional practices involve deeper changes in the teacher’s beliefs and teaching philosophy, and thus require time.

ملخص

بدأ "البحث التعاوني العمليани" بلا قلق نهجا باعتباره وسيلة استراتيجية لتطوير المعلمين مهنيا. تعرّض هذه المقالة لنتائج البحث التعاوني العملياني الذي قام به أستاذان جامعيان من تخصصين أثنيين: الأول أستاذ للغة الإنجليزية والثاني أستاذ للدراسات الثقافية. وقد هدفت هذه المقالة إلى تقديم مجموعة متنوعة من أساليب التشارك في التعلم في صور الدراسات الثقافية. كما أضافت على أهمية مراقبة بعض الجوانب والتحديات الخاصة بـ"البحث التعاوني العملياني" التي تنشأ من عمل جماعي لفريق من الأستاذة متباينة في القدرات والхаصات والتوظيفات. هذه المقالة هي حصيلة ملاحظات مستفادة من يوميات تدريسية ونقاشات فكيرة دارت بين الأستاذين، واستمرمت وُصّعت على الطلاب، بهدف تحليل طرائق تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية والدراسات الثقافية على ضوء الفلسفة التعليمية الجديدة والمستجدات الحديثة.