TEACHER LEARNING CIRCLES: READING THEORY IN PRACTICE THROUGH DIALOGUE
By Liz Suda

“Effective professional learning runs at odds with traditional professional development programs in the form of one-off seminars, conferences and workshops.”

(Professional Learning in Effective Schools, DET 2005)

A clear message in the Government’s Blueprint for Victorian schools is that quality of teaching is a key determinant in successful outcomes for students (Ferguson & Ladd 1996; Wenglinsky 2000; Darling-Hammond 2000 as quoted in DET 2005).

The research suggests that teachers need to keep abreast of new ideas about student learning and effective strategies for enhancing that learning, and that professional learning is an essential aspect of improving practice at the classroom level. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that traditional approaches to professional development, usually delivered away from the school and focusing on teacher needs and development rather than student learning, have little impact on practice unless they are explicitly followed up through application in the classroom.

The models presented in the Professional Learning in Effective Schools (DET 2005) document encourage activities which focus on classroom practice and involve teachers in active learning that is informed by theory and reflective of practice. Many schools have adopted the principles of Professional Learning Teams, where groups of teachers work together on an identified area of need in terms of student learning. Teachers become reflective practitioners who engage in a process of action research in a plan, act, and reflect cycle. The emphasis in these approaches is on developing a sense of professional identity that welcomes peer observation, mentoring, coaching and professional reading and conversation. The models suggest that teacher learning happens simultaneously with student learning and is explicitly linked to improved student learning and outcomes.

This paper will focus on a pilot program conducted throughout 2006, as part of the City Centre's William Buckland Outreach project, that encapsulates the principles of effective teacher learning, and posits the role of teacher as a professional lifelong learner. The paper draws on theories of adult learning and dialogic practice to build the concept of the teacher as learner.

Background

The City Centre

‘We know students respond positively to a curriculum that links to and is meaningful in their lives outside as well as inside the classroom, an authentic curriculum. They value opportunities to explore new ideas in depth and to do so in cooperative learning situations in which they feel secure and are able to take intellectual risks.’

(Cole 2006)

In 2004 the Education Foundation opened the City Centre, a classroom without walls in the centre of Melbourne. The Centre offers a week-long program for Year 9 -10 utilising the resources of the city through research activities and organised workshops. Students work in teams to research a hypothesis they have developed about something that interests or concerns them in the CBD. The key words of trust, independence and responsibility are reinforced throughout the program, as students are expected to work independently and move around the CBD environment, without any adult supervision.

The City Centre model emerged from significant research on effective pedagogies for engaging adolescent learners and was informed by the Middle Years Research and Development Project (MYRAD). Hypothesis based action research provides a model of the kind of learning that gives learners a degree of independence in researching issues that matter to them. It utilizes many of the
skills that the Victorian Essential Learning Standards have named as essential skills for learners. It provides opportunities for deep thinking, for independent team work, for community engagement, for negotiation of knowledge, for developing communication skills in the broader community, for reflecting on one’s own learning (metacognition) and personal growth, and ultimately for experiencing schooling in a different way. The City Centre attempts to model the best of the MYRAD recommendations (CAER 2001) in providing a challenging, stimulating and activity based approach to learning for year 9.

Two years down the track the message from teachers and students who have participated in the City Centre program is resoundingly positive (Education Foundation 2006). A recurring theme in teacher evaluations is that the week at the City Centre is a professional learning experience for them. It provides teachers with the opportunity to play a different role with their students.

**Buckland Outreach Project**

“Student disengagement in the middle years of schooling (Years 5 to 9) is associated with low academic achievement, early leaving and poor future learning and work prospects. It is a strong predictor of lifelong socioeconomic disadvantage. Worryingly, it is far more prevalent among students growing up in already disadvantaged families and communities.”

(Black 2006)

In response to the significant challenges facing schools in areas of entrenched disadvantage, the Education Foundation gained funding for a two year period from the William Buckland Foundation to support schools in Neighbourhood Renewal areas to access the City Centre program and the pedagogies it models, with the view to integrating such approaches in the Year 9 curriculum in their schools. The aim of the project was to extend the principles of the City Centre model by tapping into the learning resources of the local area, rather than the CBD. The project aimed to have a real impact on the Year 9 curriculum of these schools and to mirror the City Centre model in the local area, utilising the potential of the community as a source of authentic learning.

The first step to achieving a process of dynamic curriculum reform at the school level was to engage schools in the City Centre Program. In year one of the project, the primary focus was on maximising the learning potential of the City Centre program by providing support in the form of coaching, peer observation and direct teaching in the classrooms, and full scholarships for 25 students in each school. This experience highlighted the challenges facing schools in Neighbourhood Renewal areas as with many schools catering for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Despite their best efforts they have varying degrees of success in implementing student centred learning as a regular part of their practice (Black 2006).

The research does suggest, however, that some schools are more effective than others in achieving better outcomes for their students. Notably, schools that had developed relationships within and beyond the school community, and who support a culture of teacher professional learning along with a rich and challenging curriculum, are more effective than others in making a difference to student achievement and engagement (Black 2006). In the second year of the Buckland project the emphasis has therefore been on developing community learning partnerships to support student research in the community, building the capacity of the school and the wider community to facilitate student connectedness with their community. A professional learning program that supports reform at the classroom level was the other key strategy for the second year of the project.

**Professional Learning for Teachers**

‘Central to the vision is recognition that, as professionals, teachers need to update their skills and knowledge continuously, not only in response to a changing world but in response to new research and emerging knowledge about learning and teaching.’

(DET 2005)

New approaches to learning require that teachers rethink the way they work with students in the classroom. The City Centre’s action research and active learning process, requires a different
approach to teaching. The teacher becomes a facilitator of independent student research, but there is also an important role for the teacher to play in making explicit the skills required for doing action research in teams. There is considerable scope, and need, for skilled teaching, such as that advocated in Vygotsky’s concept of scaffolded learning within the child’s ‘zone of proximal development’, or ZPD, which refers to the distance between what children can do by themselves and the next learning that they can be helped to achieve with competent assistance” (Vygotsky 1978)

The role of the teacher as “competent assistant” suggests skills which go beyond the traditional ‘chalk and talk’ style of instruction, as each individual student would be at a different stage of learning thereby requiring an individual approach to moving to the next stage of learning. Cheyne and Turalli (1999) argue that dialogue is central to the process of scaffolded learning but suggest that the nature of the dialogue, or rather different types of dialogue, must be clearly understood in order for the teacher to know how to extend the child’s thinking. They refer to the work of a number of theorists including Bakhtin, Bohm and Vygotsky to explore the different perspectives on how dialogic processes can enhance learning. As Bakhtin (1984) suggests, ‘life by its very nature is dialogic’ and we need to freely engage in open ended dialogue to fully engage with life, and learning.

“To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium. (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 293)

Bakhtin's view of dialogue as a central aspect of living and learning, of being in the world suggests that teachers need to actively engage in different types of dialogue with their students, from individual dialogue with one student, to small group conversations and then whole class discussion. Cheyne and Turalli (1999) argue that such an approach requires teachers to understand the nature of dialogue and how it contributes to conceptual learning and development.

How might teachers develop an understanding of how dialogue impacts on the learning of the individual and the group. How can they learn to facilitate effective and powerful dialogical learning? And what do teachers need to know about teaching and learning to experiment with new and innovative approaches to learning?

In the early 1980's, Mezirow, Freire and others stressed that the heart of all learning lies in the way we process experience, in particular, our critical reflection of experience. They spoke of learning as a cycle that begins with experience, continues with reflection and later leads to action, which itself becomes a concrete experience for reflection. Theories of experiential learning underpin many of the new approaches being advocated for secondary classrooms and draw on established approaches used in adult learning settings.

The Teacher Learning Circles were an attempt to bring together some of these traditions as a way of engaging teachers in a process of dynamic learning that connected current educational theory to their lived experience in the classroom. Drawing on theories of dialogic learning as espoused by Freire, Bakhtin, Bohm and others, and the Swedish and Spanish traditions of learning circles, the Buckland project embarked on an experimental approach of engaging teachers in the reading of theory through a process of collaborative dialogue.

**The Teacher Learning Circles Pilot: Informing teachers’ professional voice**

“It's been the best professional development activity we've had in years. It gave the younger teachers the opportunity to talk about educational theory, and it gave us all more confidence to say what we know. Even though I haven't been able to come to all of them I’ve read all the readings and talked to the others. It's a terrific process”
Jenny Meggs, Year 9 PLT leader, Hillcrest Secondary College
The research base

The Teacher Learning Circles are a simple concept based on significant research on similar approaches in other countries. Learning Circles provide an informal approach to learning where groups of people get together on a regular basis (usually 2 hours weekly) and explore an issue or area of interest with the assistance of a trained facilitator who has a very specific role to play. The method used in the Teacher Learning Circles is a hybrid version of two different approaches to circle learning, that of the Swedish Learning Circles and the Dialogic Literary Circles in Spain (Suda 2002).

Learning Circles have been the mainstay of adult education programs in Sweden for over 100 years. They are embedded in the cultural life of the society and are regarded by some as a means of maintaining a healthy democracy (Larssen 2000). Learning Circles enable participants to express and explore ideas without fear of ridicule or judgement. The facilitator is there to ensure that all voices are heard and that the principles of egalitarian dialogue are followed. Learning Circles usually have a resource kit that provides participants with information and issues to be resolved in their topic of interest. The group may meet for a fixed period, eg. 10 weeks, or continue of with new topics or issues. Adult Learning Australia piloted this methodology with the Reconciliation kit. Learning Circles have also been used in professional learning and evaluation contexts both here in Australia and in Canada and the United States (Seal 2004).

In Spain, the concept of dialogic learning for adults arose during the renaissance period following Franco’s death in the mid 70’s. A renewed sense of community emerged during this liberationist period and adults who had been denied an education began to reclaim their right to learn. The Dialogic Literacy Circles (DLC) have become a movement in their own right with over a hundred circles operating in Spain and several in other European countries that have joined “the movement”. Drawing on the theories of Habermas, Beck and Freire the DLC is based on the idea that the reading of classical literature provides the linguistic and cultural capital that ordinary people need to engage with mainstream ruling culture (Soler 2000). Through a process of egalitarian dialogue, ‘saying the word’, the participants learn to read and explore the ideas of sophisticated texts. The process is guided by seven clear principles which the facilitator strictly adheres to and reinforces throughout the process.

The seven principles of Dialogic Literacy Circles:

- **Egalitarian Dialogue**: All members of the group are equal and their opinions equally shared.
- **Cultural Intelligence**: All people, whatever their age, share the capabilities of language and action, which can be developed further through interaction.
- **Transformation**: Dialogic learning transforms interpersonal, familiar or work relations. All learning can be transformative.
- **Instrumental Dimension**: The development of skills and knowledge is more intense when it takes place in a dialogic framework.
- **Creation of Meaning**: Meaning re-emerges when interaction among people is guided by themselves.
- **Solidarity**: Collaborative work develops a sense of solidarity and support.
- **Equality of Differences**: People who come from diverse economic and cultural backgrounds should have the right to hold their own views and be treated as equal partners in collaborative learning.

(Flecha.2000)

In my study tour of the Dialogic Literacy Circle in Spain in 2002, I witnessed this process at work in about fifteen different circles throughout Spain and spoke to many participants and facilitators about their experience. The reading of classical literature is a fundamental element for the participants. They said they felt empowered and experienced a measure of social status in having read Shakespearean
classics, Dickens, Joyce and their own Cervantes and Lorca. It provided an entrée into the ‘educated’ class and had a powerful transformative influence on their lives. Giving people voice to say what they know or just beginning to know in a trusted environment generated a powerful dynamic of personal transformation. The participants, many of whom had been in the same group for years, spoke effusively about the impact participation had had on their lives. “It’s changed everything for me” one participant told me.

The Dialogic Literacy Circles and the Swedish Learning Circles therefore provide a powerful model for adult learning. They provide concrete evidence of the powerful and transformative nature of dialogical approaches with a range of learners. Underpinning the development of the Teacher Learning Circle was the concept of the teacher as a reflective practitioner and theoriser. The selected readings, ‘classical’ literature for educators, provided an overview of issues related to engaging middle years learners, namely:

- Year 9 as a critical year
- Teaching thinking skills and dispositions
- Approaches to enhancing learning in the middle years of schooling
- Learning Communities
- Individual Learning
- Experiential Learning
- Adult Learning Principles
- Whole school reform

The intention was to provide teachers with examples of current thinking around these issues to both inform and shape their own reflections about innovative approaches to working with Year 9 students in their own school.

**Introducing teachers to the concept of Dialogue**

At the first TLC meeting the theoretical underpinnings of the dialogic learning circle approach were thoroughly explored, and teachers were given an overview on dialogic theory, from Freire to Bohm.

David Bohm (1992) has highlighted the importance of dialogue as a collaborative approach to achieving common ground as compared to the traditional forms of debate where one person seeks to convince another of the rightness of their position. Dialogue, he argues, involves listening to understand the others position rather than finding flaws in their argument, enlarging ones position, remaining open, living with complexity by not seeking ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’, and most importantly seeking to reach a common understanding. The concept of egalitarian dialogue can thus be understood and described in a variety of ways, but its purpose is very clear in developing a community of learners who trust, respect and listen to the other.

Most teachers found these distinctions quite helpful but were concerned that the ‘debating’ paradigm might override the principle of sharing and extending thinking through open and active listening.

A recurring theme in all the circles I visited in Spain was that the facilitator constantly reinforced the 7 principles of dialogic learning and the need to remain open to the views of others rather than seek to impose an idea. Setting and reinforcing such ground rules is essential to effective and productive dialogue that builds a sense of community. The seven principles of dialogic practice as practiced in Spain and the seven principles for effective teacher learning (DET) were adapted to the professional learning context and the following principles were suggested as the basis for collaborative dialogue that would enable teachers to read the theory in their practice through a process of dialogue.

**Key principles of TLC for Professional Learning**

1. Build "community" with other learners
2. Construct knowledge through personal experience
3. Connect knowledge through reading and discussing educational theory
4. Support other learners in their reflective practices
5. Document reflections on professional experiences
6. Collaborate on diverse teaching practices
7. Transform classroom practice

A dialogic learning community

It was evident from the first session that the teachers were open to talking, but it was also clear that they were careful in the way they were talking to each other. Perhaps the most telling element of this approach is that by the end of the year participants were very comfortable with each other and were quite open and honest about their classroom practice, and responses to the readings. A number of people said that even though they had not done all the readings they felt as if they had. This resonates with the experiences of participants in the dialogic literacy circles in Spain. Often participants would read the selected extracts after the discussion, which merely added to their understanding of the text. The participants also benefited from talking to teachers from other schools as it enabled them to share different approaches to meeting the needs of similar student cohorts.

In the evaluation of the Teacher Learning Circles, at the end of the year, all participants said that the experience was valuable, and had added to their understanding of how they themselves could theorize about their own practice. Many commented that some readings resonated more strongly with their experience than others. As the focus was on reforming the Year 9 curriculum, most teachers found the article Understanding Year 9 (Cole et al 2006) particularly useful. However they also recognised that reading around the seams, the interconnected themes, was also essential. All agreed that the process of dialogue enhanced their understanding of the issues at stake.

The role of the Facilitator

Participants also emphasised the importance of the facilitator’s role, and recognised that unobtrusive facilitation was a skilled process. The facilitator’s role is to ensure that all voices are heard in the tradition of collaborative egalitarian dialogue, that diversions are handled diplomatically, that the dialogue is sustained and that the text is explored in depth. This process can be learned through a process of critically reflective participation in such a group, but most participants felt that they would need more training to be able to facilitate and sustain a group discussion over a two hour period.

For the dialogue to be smooth, free flowing and naturalistic the facilitator has to ensure that:
- the basic dialogic principles (ground rules) are adhered to
- anyone who wants to speak is able to
- everyone is aware of the content of the readings
- the topic/ text is referred to in order to maintain coherence of content
- the discussion stays on topic, without imposing or breaking the flow of conversation
- they do not impose a particular reading of the text or their own ideas
- That they mediate any conflict within the group
- sustain and redirect conversation when it flags by constantly referring to the text
- draws out who may be shy to speak
- all views are treated with respect
- no individual dominates proceedings

Maintaining and sustaining a conversation over a two hour period, around a particular text or topic can be quite a challenging process. The theory behind the two hour time frame is that people have to sit with an issue for a while to come to new understandings. On a number of occasions the conversation seemed to be coming to an end and gentle facilitation was required to draw the conversation back to the ideas in the text and encourage participants to think differently about the topic. At times these were the most productive sessions where new insights and perspectives were gained.
There is no simple set of rules for the facilitator to follow, but the basic principles of egalitarian dialogue in collaboration with the meaning of the text provide the facilitator with a path to follow in drawing out and drawing together the ideas of the group. The facilitator must therefore have developed some understanding of the issues in the text in order to make those connections.

In discussions with a number of facilitators in Spain there was general agreement that facilitation is a learned skill and that teachers often find it harder than non-teachers to facilitate without imposing or seeking resolution to the discussion. Open ended dialogue, without too much direction or structure is said to create a stronger sense of solidarity amongst participants. The text and what it says should provide the structure and flow of the dialogue. The facilitator must always struggle with themselves to resist the urge to draw grand conclusions to the discussion. The learning happens on an individual level within a collaborative environment. Dialogue is a dynamic process of relationship building and the exploration of ideas that creates meaning and understanding, that can lead to transformation in one’s actions and view of the world.

Facilitator training is clearly an important variable in achieving success with learning circle models. The facilitators in Spain argued that the best training is to be a participant in a circle and observe and reflect on the process. Others argue that discussions with other facilitators are also helpful in teasing out the issue at stake in facilitating a free flowing egalitarian dialogue. In a professional learning context one might well argue for a more explicit and structured training program for facilitators.

**TLC for Teachers**

The Teacher Learning Circles’ acronym of TLC (often used to refer to tender loving care) was not entirely serendipitous, but rather a fortuitous and deliberate blending of concepts. The concept of the teacher as an adult learner engaged in a process of lifelong learning is combined with the concept of the teacher as a professional learner; a learner who seeks to utilize new approaches and theories of learning in nurturing the minds of students in the classroom. Teachers need to be nurtured in their learning, just as much as their students. The teachers participating in the TLC’s welcomed the opportunity to sit back, relax and allow the dialogic process to take them on a reflective journey, where they were able to connect the written theory of the text to their own practice. They were then able to synthesise those ideas into their own theoretical conclusions. In this way professional learning was enhanced by learning to read theory into practice through a process of dialogue.

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