LEARNING IN A CONTEXT OF CHANGE – PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL BENEFITS

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Abstract

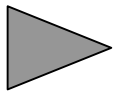
This article reports the results of a piece of research carried out with the purpose of understanding the learning outcomes of participation in a wide-ranging educational project. The findings indicate that participants develop in many, sometimes unexpected, ways and that development pertains to professional and personal levels. The processes and sources of learning are equally complex and diverse.

Introduction

Change and learning often appear together in the literature of change management, where change seems to be identified with learning experiences.

'Change is fundamentally and profoundly about learning – the two are linked in a way that makes them symbiotic.' (O'Sullivan and West-Burnham, 1998:45).

Creating new opportunities for teacher learning is seen as leading to increased understanding which in its turn contributes to consolidating and sustaining implemented change. Whether planned or accidental, initiated at personal or institutional level, change is highly contextual and the management of change needs to take account of specific variables in different contexts of change implementation. Change may happen in a wide range of forms, from increased awareness to bigger institutional change. Very many features of change are to be found in the process of experiencing novelty, not necessarily in the creation of something new. Whatever the outcome, change is not sustainable unless participants internalise the 'novelty' in whatever form and learn in diverse predictable and less predictable ways.



Research overview

This article reports on the learning outcomes derived from participation in project evaluation research. A team of 20 ESP lecturers took part in a large-scale study of impact carried out in order to evaluate the results of innovative projects in the area of ESP teaching and learning. In doing so, this particular team of researchers widened the range of development opportunities for themselves and their achievements can inform the ESP teaching community about the benefits of undertaking educational research of a type that is not customary for English language professionals.

During the impact study research and after the process was successfully concluded, the team reflected on their learning, trying to identify the particular skills they had developed as well as the factors that facilitated their own development. The team members wrote individual accounts of the process, kept diaries during a three-day research workshop and took part in a group discussion. The data provided by the team was analysed in the framework of several research questions. This article reports on the results obtained for two research questions:

1. Have the project team developed professionally and/or personally as a result of participating in the impact study research?
2. What were the sources of learning?

The whole array of skills is difficult to predict, and so are the learning outcomes for all team members. But by looking at what individuals say they learned and putting together all the outcomes we can get a picture of what participants can learn from a similar professional experience. The table below summarizes the findings which will be analysed in this section:

WHAT	HOW
♦ Wide range of professional skills ♦ Communication and interpersonal skills ♦ About the project team ♦ About other teachers and teaching circumstances ♦ About oneself	▪ From experience, by doing the study ▪ By sharing ideas and discussing work with the whole team ▪ By talking to other teachers and observing their classes

Table 1: Learning outcomes and learning sources

Range of skills

The range of skills participants say they have developed is very wide, including a variety of professional/cognitive, social, affective and personal skills and awareness.

Professional/ cognitive:

1) teaching skills
2) research skills
3) critical thinking
4) knowledge of language through improved repertoire of terminology
5) interdisciplinary skills which enable the participants to tackle a variety of tasks
6) project management skills

7) managing people

Social

1) communicative competence
2) strategic competence in terms of responding better to external influences
3) working in teams
4) interpersonal skills
5) increased awareness about the team itself
6) increased awareness about teachers in other contexts

Affective

1) coping with unexpected situations
2) acting independently coupled with dislike of imposition

Personal

1) Learning about oneself

The range of skills is impressive and much wider than expected. Although teachers involved in a project aimed at upgrading the teaching of English can be expected to have improved their teaching skills, the data show that they claim to have developed as professionals as well as individuals in a variety of ways.

- **Teaching skills**

The accounts contain data about improved teaching as a result of participating in the impact study, and are the only instrument which do so at length. The group discussion tackles the issue of impact study research relevance for teaching, but the discussion concentrates on a wide range of professional and social skills.

10 out of 12 accounts say that observing other colleagues' classes was an invitation for the observers to reflect on their own teaching. They did so in various ways, most often through comparing the style and techniques of the observed teacher with their own.

'There were good moments of reflection for me – do I do that in the same way or totally different? A lot of 'whys' and 'becauses' overwhelmed me, not always in my favour.' (Account 6)

Observers also reflect on well-established ways of doing things and question teaching procedures which had been taken for granted (account 2), or think about solutions to complex situations arising in the observed class (account 2). Although reflecting doesn't necessarily mean learning something new, it does contribute to increased awareness of teaching procedures, styles, techniques, and also about one's own teaching. Account 8 explains how observing other teachers' classes helped the observer learn more about her own teaching:

'What seems odd to me is that I had been teaching that lesson (nb from a widely-used textbook) for a long time without realising that some improvement was necessary. I had to observe someone else's class to become aware that although there was interaction between teacher and students, their answers could not count as real communication.' (Account 8)

One aspect of increased awareness is refreshing knowledge of methodology and vocabulary for class description through preparation for classroom observation:

Before the observation I felt the need to re-read about aspects of ELT methodology such as lesson planning, class management, … . I did this to refresh my vocabulary for lesson description, but also for details, ingredients of efficient lessons, which I thought I might have forgotten. (Account 2)

5 of the 10 accounts that discuss observer's reflection on their own teaching explicitly mention learning about teaching as a result of doing classroom observation. The respondents learned new activities and procedures (accounts 2, 3, 8) but they also learned about other teachers and teaching situations (account 10) as well as about students' needs (account 1). Learning about teaching took a variety of forms and this very wide range of ideas show that the participants welcomed the opportunity generated by the impact study to reflect on and reexamine their teaching expertise.

- **Research skills**

After participation in the impact study, the team claim to have developed research skills: 3 participants in the group discussion refer to learning about instrument design and administration, to developing research skills relevant for PhD work, to learning about research methodology. Four accounts also mention learning of research skills while 7 accounts reflect on various aspects of research. 9 of the 13 diaries contain extended comments on various aspects of research, primarily about data interpretation which was the focus of the meeting when the diaries were kept. I take such comments as evidence of learning about research, even though the respondents do not explicitly say that they have developed their research skills. The quality of their reflection shows that they did learn. In their accounts respondents comment on the quality of the research instruments they have used, criticising specific items in the questionnaires and making suggestions for improvement, they compare qualitative with quantitative data and reflect on responding to the teacher's questionnaire. On a more abstract level, they reflect on the researcher's role and on getting access to the data, on the observer's role in the classroom and on the sequence between various stages in doing research . In the group discussion participants consider data analysis to be always provisional – a sound conclusion at the end of a demanding process, and speak about the need to disseminate the experience and results, which is an indication of learning about managing innovation where dissemination is always a necessary phase.

'What I found most interesting about this stage were the answers to the open questions in the Student and Teacher questionnaires. I enjoyed collecting and grouping the different answers around certain categories – some of these answers, or the kind of patterns that could be discerned, were fascinating.' (Account 5)

Account 5 is full of reflection on research aspects – particularly instrument design - and is a good indication of why I consider this kind of reflection as evidence of learning.

Nine diaries also record very specific concerns about the research process occasioned by reflection on the presentations of Impact Study results made by each team. Diaries 1 and 7 contain some very interesting thoughts on objectivity of analysis and point out the danger of interpreting the results so as to show the superiority of our project, or the need to base interpretations on data only and not on already existing perceptions about the project. This issue is important because it

indicates that participatory evaluation can be objective and that insiders are not necessarily carried away by their own feelings about their project.

'I realised that we can only work with real data, the visible, tangible results and ignore previous perceptions about the project.' (Diary 1)

Doing empirical research was new for most people – only 2 respondents mentioned having used and interpreted statistics before. Local research practices are in the area of comparative linguistic analysis. Research skills find immediate use and relevance for PhD work.

'And the result …everything I know about research, which I can use for my PhD, the Romanian side of my activity, is due to this study. (Diary 1)

- **Other professional /cognitive skills**

Several participants in the group discussion give their perceptions of the cognitive and intellectual skills people have sharpened as a result of participating in the impact study, and in the project as a whole. All these skills are seen as part of professional competence.

'Our professional competence has increased enormously, our capacity to respond to new situations, we can analyse and think through new situations, we really understand things better, we don't follow cliches anymore, we have sharpened our judgement …. And this is part of being a professional, I should think.' (Group discussion)

Another respondent claims that the team have developed a whole range of competences, from knowledge of teaching and research methodology to communicative and strategic competence:

'I think there are three main aspects of our competence … First it is linguistic competence, language and about language, and I mean we learned a lot of terminology when doing the Impact Study, then it's knowledge of methodology, from teaching to research methodology and thirdly we have remarkably increased our communicative competence, communication with the environment, which I myself did not have before. And …maybe we all developed a strategic competence

as well, we are aware of what is expected from us and know what steps to take and how to react in various situations … and I confess I didn't have that before, I developed it while being involved in the project. (Group discussion)

Participants who have a coordinating role in their departments refer to improved management of people:

'And we learned about management, those of us who have a coordinating role in our departments have learned about managing people in our institutions.' (Group discussion)

There is also a multidisciplinary element of learning that means improved knowledge but is also to do with confidence in one's abilities to learn in a multidisciplinary effort and with a positive attitude towards challenges and change.

'And we have discovered new fields, as if several doors have been opened and we could choose where we wanted to enter, depending on our interest and time, we can specialise in other fields if we are interested, we have experience we can build on, maybe that's why we need encouragement.' (Group discussion)

This quote emphasizes emotional aspects of learning, which involve the capacity to cope with new experiences and to approach them with confidence, as well as the desire to accept and even look for new learning opportunities.

- **Social and affective skills: Self-confidence**

The team emphasise the development of interpersonal skills and improved thinking abilities which do help the process of teaching although they do not appear to be closely linked to classroom teaching. There is a strong attitude element, which shows that people believe they have changed their attitudes and behavior – learning to act independently, to think critically, to cope with the unexpected, all leading to increased self-confidence. They also mention dislike of imposition which can be considered as a consequence of development in the ways mentioned above. Diary 10 attributed self-confidence to a common purpose, encouragement and sense of direction and diary 1 records the same idea when it refers to the team being confident and in control about the work they did. Self-confidence is not something ethereal and difficult to notice, but comes from meaningful work. The other side of

the coin is that confidence carries the danger of becoming uncritical to the quality of one's work:

'We are so much in control of our work that we can't even think that we have made mistakes.' (Diary 1).

Although not explicitly mentioned as an outcome in the group discussion, the idea of self-confidence is present everywhere in the way people refer to their abilities and relationships with other colleagues. Self-confidence was strengthened through receiving confirmation of their improved ability from colleagues from other university departments who requested support with designing projects.

'...the overall impression is still with me – satisfaction, pride, regret and the consciousness that we, the lucky ones, have to change things for the better in the future.' (Group discussion)

- **Insecurity**

There are also moments when participants voice feelings of insecurity about their expertise. This sort of data can be interpreted as counterevidence to the claim about the team's increased self-confidence as a result of learning.

'But I still feel uncertain at times, doubt my own abilities, possibly because I know I can do better ... also maybe because of what [one of the participants] was saying, the need to keep up standards.' (Group discussion)

It is also possible to interpret 'doubt' in the quote above positively, as a sign of maturity. It may be the case that people who admit that they are unsure about their ability to cope actually have a lot of self-confidence, which pushes them to seek further improvement.

The diaries offer data that records insecurity about the ability to make a good presentation of the data analysis work , as well as insecurity about the quality of one's work in terms of selecting and analysis data. Some participants also feel insecure about their role in the team, about their ability to contribute to the accomplishment of the study.

'I am aware of the confidence and professionalism of this team. A question arises: am I good enough for this group?'.(Group discussion)

Participants explain their doubts, and these explanations seem to suggest that insecurity is linked with the need for constant and continuing improvement. The data seems to indicate that insecurity and self-confidence coexist in a sort of intellectual restlessness, a permanent attitude of inquiry and search for development opportunities. Insecurity and self-confidence together give a full picture of development. It seems therefore more justified to take insecurity not as counterevidence to self-confidence, but as an indication that self-confidence is not the same as self-sufficiency. Learning involves a permanent quest, it does not stop once a certain level is reached.

- **Learning team work**

Participants say that they learnt how to work in a team and constantly refined their ability to work with their colleagues. Nine accounts describe the experience of working with a peer observer while collecting data through classroom observation. Five of those respondents actually say that they learned to be better team members, primarily through giving and receiving feedback and through learning to be tolerant with different opinions.

'And that's one thing I also learned ... to patiently keep my senses open to the partner ...I learned my lesson to give each detail one more thought before deciding and , believe me, I am grateful to [my partner] for having revealed me this facet.' (Account 4)

During classroom observation, the team also learned how to discuss with the teachers whose classrooms were observed:

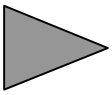
'This was a new sort of exercise for me: trying to find the right way of making suggestions by stressing the positive aspects and not sounding too critical.' (Account 5)

Account 2 mentions an uneasy relationship with one co-observer, which is evidence that difficulties in communication will occur in spite of people becoming better team workers.

I think that extended reference to team issues is due to the fact that team work was a novelty for us as it was for most teachers in Romania.

'We learned what teamwork and collaboration mean, they weren't there before. We didn't realise at the beginning the value of bringing 6 institutions together and working on common objectives. We learned as the project unfolded.' (Group discussion)

The data suggests that team values were eagerly embraced by the project members, but in project management terms, teams are not the answer to all problems. On the contrary, being part of the complex process whereby a strong team emerged made me more aware of the dangers of embracing concepts such as team work without analysing the process of team formation. I am more aware now of the fact that real teams emerge in certain conditions, not by decision and mandate or by team building exercises.



Sources of learning

Apart from indicating a wide range of learning outcomes, the data offer insights into the factors that facilitated learning.

- **Learning from experience**

The issue of learning from experience is discussed in several diaries which give detailed accounts of how team members prepared for the team meeting and how, during the team meeting, they thought about their work all the time. Such data brings evidence that they were fully responsible for the whole research process, and fully involved in it.

'I kept thinking of the work we had done … and especially of the expectations… What if something went wrong, what if my ideas sound boring and even ridiculous?. During coffee and meal breaks we share our problems, find out some of the answers, several times we discover our mistakes and willingly begin to correct them.'. (Diary 8)

The conditions for experiential learning were present, and we can assume that learning derived primarily from experience, as training was indeed very scarce. Of course, experience includes all the team meetings, the influence of the consultant and of the team. From this point of view it seems that a major role of project management is to organise and facilitate the interaction of team members.

Interaction of project members meant group discussion, decision-making and follow-up action which are elements of experiential learning. What the team learned from experience proved to be different from what they learned from input:

'*…we could see from experience that what we have learnt differs from what was given as guidelines, so we had to start afresh several times…'* (Group discussion)

The data also provides examples that can be interpreted as indicating learning from experience. For instance, diary 2 records the fact that while presenting her data analysis work to the team, the respondent felt more at ease with this task than she expected. This could be attributed to the experience of working with the data.

'I think that what mattered was that I happily noticed that I could discuss the results themselves, without paying much attention to what I had put on paper back home.' (Diary 2)

- **Learning from each other**

Participants say they have learned both from the mistakes and the good work of the team members and they feel their own work was 'validated' when presented to the larger team. These ideas are present in the group discussion as well as in diaries.

Nine out of thirteen diaries comment on the presentations made by each instrument team during the meeting. Listening to presentations generated reflection on research issues.

Several diaries record specific interest in other presenters' work which is relevant for areas of departmental activity (diary 1) or personal MA dissertations (diary 5).

'I shouldn't forget about testing … I need the team report so that I can use their classification and types of tests for analysing the tests designed in our department.'

Diaries 4 and 5 record the fact that there is something to learn from everyone. Discussions with individual team members proved useful as well.

'I had an illuminating talk with X on my attempts at doing some maths with those figures. ... I understood her points and abandoned two tables, modified some additions…' (Diary 5)

However, listening to presentations did not make sense for everyone.

- **Counterevidence – Lack of interest**

Diary 2 records lack of interest in what other people have to say, and the suspicion that the feeling is reciprocal. This attitude could be taken as counterevidence to my explanation that sharing work with the wider team was a source of learning and a form of experiential learning.

'I don't seem to have ears for the others, nor do they have patience for me.'

(Diary 2)

7. If participants do not listen to each other and see no point in doing so, then we can assume that there were few chances to learn from each other and from their joint experience. The presence of such pieces of data indicates that learning from experience cannot be taken for granted.

Summing up

The results show that the team developed in many ways that cannot necessarily be envisaged at the beginning of a project. They combine professional /cognitive with social and affective aspects. Increased awareness of the wider educational context is also part of the learning outcomes. Learning of new skills (in areas concerning teaching, research, project management, managing people, etc) resulted in increased self-confidence and confidence in the group as an agent of change. Participants learned for themselves, but also for the group in the sense of developing the ability to work collaboratively. Learning also meant reinforcing the

sense of group identity and of confidence in what people can achieve by working as a group. However, insecurity coexists with increased confidence as, maybe paradoxically, both result from learning and development. Professional learning is not a one-off episode but becomes a permanent need in search of new challenges.

The participants in the impact study seem to have learned mainly from experience, which includes the research process itself as well as the collaboration and interaction with colleagues in the team. The latter includes a variety of learning sources: learning from peer feedback, from team discussion of issues of mutual interest, and also from the good work as well as mistakes of colleagues.

The data show that the team were fully involved in the task and prepared carefully for the team meetings. Full responsibility and participation seems to increase motivation and to foster learning.

References and bibliography

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