

## When? Challenging Issue of Time and Timing

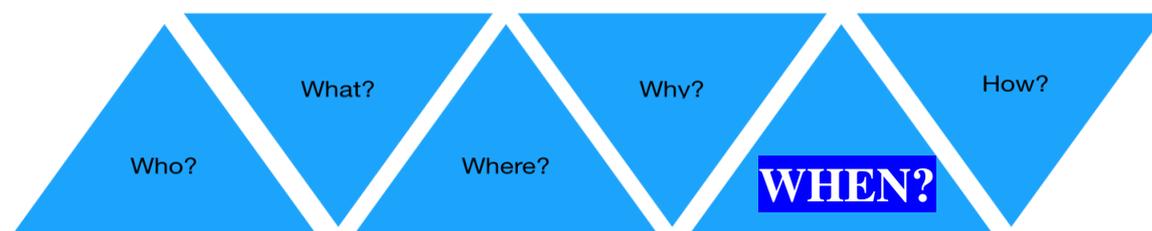
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### Abstract

In this section, there is an examination of some of the challenges around the question of “WHEN” collaborative teachers learning can be initiated and when facilitated. Some of the scenarios presented are based both on research carried out during the EFFeCT project and from other relevant sources. The key prerequisites and principles underpinning professional enabling of collaborative teachers learning are also implicitly (and, occasionally, explicitly) re-addressed here<sup>1</sup>.

### Contents

When? Challenging Issue of Time and Timing .....	1
Abstract .....	1
Two heads are better than one! .....	2
When? Throughout one’s professional life! .....	2
When? Whenever possible! .....	3
Chance encounters of the professional learning kind. ....	4
Setting the tone: building the environment for collaborative learning. ....	6
Recommendations for facilitators of professional learning opportunities .....	6
Developing in- and out-of-school opportunities for collaborative teacher learning .....	8
Professional Associations .....	9
Modern Technology .....	9
In summary .....	11
References .....	12



*“if not now, when?” Hillel the Elder (in Pirkei Avot, Chapter 1:14)*

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## Two heads are better than one!

Bell (2016:27) proposes “a definition of collaboration deduced from the literature as working together, towards a shared vision of purpose and outcome for personal, professional or system-wide benefit.”

Collaboration comes about when there is (what I am here calling) ‘situational realisation’. For an individual, situational realisation occurs when one recognises that, in order to understand better a professional concept or professional situation or to solve a personal, professional problem, it is necessary to find out more. It is a product of personal, professional reflection. Situational realisation may also occur during professional discourse, conversations or dialogue between individuals. The realisation may come about from an inspection or peer observation and reflection upon feedback from these. Such “Eureka’ moments need to be followed by action in response to recognition, Kirkham (2003) terms this response, ‘reflexivity’. Reflexivity leads to changes in behaviour, the product of learning. The actual impetus may come about from a whole variety of different sources and at different times – sometimes through policy and practice and other times quite serendipitously but always connected to the individual educators’ personal desire to improve professional knowledge, understanding and practice and to the benefit of their students.

## When? Throughout one’s professional life!

One external stimulus might be an individual’s or individuals’ response to Jack Ma (founder of Alibaba) speaking at the 2018 Davos World Economic Summit about the future of work and competition from robots and artificial intelligence declared that,

“If we do not change the way we teach, thirty years later it will be chaotic! ... the things we teach are from the past two hundred years and are knowledge-based and” (in that field) “the machines are smarter” (and faster). “We have to teach something unique.” (The soft skills we should teach about are) “values, believing, independent thinking, teamwork and care for others” so we should “teach sports, music and arts to make sure that humans are different from machines... We have to think about that!”<sup>2</sup>

### **Some stimuli**



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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHt-5-RyrJK>

Individual educators decide to engage with learning for professional knowledge and practice for many reasons. From a total set of possible reasons, these may include that: they may have a personal interest or passion about educational theory and practice, theory into practice and practice into theory; they may be consummate lifelong learners; they are making career decisions; there is a particular professional teaching and learning problem which they wish to resolve; they are responding to local, national or international test results of student achievement; they are responding (or required to respond) to an imposed new curriculum or other national, regional or local policy document; they are developing policy for and practice in their schools.

Stimuli for good professional practice come from many sources, including the OECD.

“... Top school systems ... provide an environment in which teachers work together to frame good practice, and they establish intelligent pathways for teachers to grow in their careers.”  
(Schleicher, 2016: 12)

Continued professional learning post initial training and entry to the profession is not only a vocational requirement in many countries, it is also an expectation of those who would call themselves “professionals”.

There is no country anywhere in the world where the initial education and/or training course for teachers is sufficient to give the graduates of such the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for the whole of their career as educators. The nature of knowledge is that it is constantly changing and this is equally true of knowledge for the understanding and practice of and in pedagogy and didactics.

### **When? Whenever possible!**

“I know I cannot teach anyone anything, I can only provide an environment in which (s)he can learn.” (Rogers 1969: 389; my brackets)

One of the most obvious times for the facilitation of collaborative teachers learning is during the induction period for newly-qualified teachers (normally this is in the first and second years of employment as a teacher/educator).<sup>3</sup>

At every stage in the professional life of an educator, collaborative teachers' learning enhances the capability of the individual and the collective membership of the learning group. It is as true at promotion to headship as it is to the first teaching post.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that since systems, customs, practices and culture differ from school to school, induction should, therefore, be a requirement for all teachers/educators/employees new to employment at a particular institution.

## Chance encounters of the professional learning kind

Corridor meetings often take place in all sorts of organisations - not just schools - and these are usually unplanned opportunities for collegial collaboration and professional learning.

Following recent research in the US, Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development takes on new meaning for educators. Spillane (cited in Sparks, 2018) found that there is "a strong association between physical proximity in a building and who teachers talk to about their work," said Spillane, a professor of learning and organisational change at Northwestern University. "When you are close to somebody and your functional zone, your work zone, overlaps with theirs. You are more likely to have a chance encounter."

Spillane highlights physical proximity and this is particularly pertinent those teachers who work with assistant pedagogues special-needs staff who work within the same working space. It would be absurd (and, indeed, counter-productive) were there not to be collaboration between co-professionals at both the lesson-planning stages and the implementation of these. Where there are situations where people do work together in the same working space, how that is to happen, how it should be in practice and how this practice should be evaluated, should all be worked out and agreed in advance. Both (or all if there are more than two) establishing agreed ground rules informed by internal policies and knowledge of external best practice, testing these out and working together to ensure their goals are met. When there is a conflict of views, this should not be seen as a negative but as the basis for professional discussion if necessary with a facilitator or arbiter to gain constructive resolution and agreement about practice. It is a sign of a professional that the needs of the client are put first. If, to ensure these needs are satisfied, further professional development for the provider of the services is necessary then the institution should seek to facilitate the resources for this to occur.

Among participants in the countries involved in the EFFeCT project, the value of the coffee break was commented upon and emphasised by teachers as an opportunity for professional learning; "a chance to ask further about comments made by others in the room", to share views and to engage with other colleagues and co-professionals in an informal and safe time allocation.



In an article on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) schools, Miller (2016) offers four tips for non-STEM teachers<sup>4</sup>: in curriculum mapping to achieve a balanced curriculum; in planning and executing interdisciplinary, project-based learning; in planning and executing lead and support roles; deriving criteria for student success/competency and related evidence. These emphasise the importance of collaboration as a natural, professional phenomenon when and where student learning and achievement is at the centre. They highlight the importance of early planning together and purposeful collaboration.

Anderson (2002:21) observed that, “Increased organisational demands, workload, norms of privacy, departmental membership, timetable and the physical nature of the institution are often used as an excuse for not having time to collaborate.”

Further, Bell (2016:15) suggests that the “marketisation of schools, encouraging autonomy, reduces the desire to share ideas and generates an atmosphere of suspicion between schools, creating a system where schools are competitors not partners.” (Indeed, one might extrapolate from the ways in which funding and rewards are managed in a number of jurisdictions where the system promotes ‘competition and not collaboration between teachers that such systemic conditions generate a reluctance to trust and to share.)

The lack of communication was noted more than two decades ago by Everard and Morris (1996:226). When comparing other professions and teaching, they saw the latter as lacking in communication:

“There is one condition of successful change which seems more prevalent in industry than in schools: industrial managers and professional staff get together more often, whereas the cellular organisation in schools means that teachers struggle privately with their problems and anxieties. It is unusual for teachers to observe and discuss their colleagues’ work.”

While it is true that, for many teachers, the above may be conceived of as the reality of life in schools even today, these are only perceived constraints which the most effective teachers, headteachers and schools overcome through initiated collaboration, creative solutions and significant changes in culture and practice in response to recognition of personal, institutional review and reflection. When the conditions referred to by Anderson, Bell and Everard and Morris are prevalent is the very time when collaborative teachers learning should be implemented in order to (re)establish the values implicit in professional learning and practice.

Tam (2015) found that the features of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) which help to facilitate teacher change are: the development of a coherent structure, a collaborative culture, and

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<sup>4</sup> [www.edutopia.org/blogs/tag/teacher-collaboration](http://www.edutopia.org/blogs/tag/teacher-collaboration)

effective learning activities. These features help teachers to overcome initial difficulties and induce their motivation for transformation. Teachers, she found (op.cit.) change in five dimensions (curriculum, teaching, learning, roles of teachers, and learning to teach) and three patterns (change in practice but not in belief, change in belief but not in practice, change in practice and belief) were detected. She argues that cultivating an effective PLC is significant for teacher development.

### **Setting the tone: building the environment for collaborative learning**

Collaborative teacher learning is more likely when facilitators / chairs of meetings / headteachers take time at the beginning of meetings of teachers and other educators to establish clear ground rules of engagement (see Chatham House<sup>5</sup> and other trust-developing devices). Consent and agreement to such patterns of collective behaviour by the membership - no matter how small in number - ensures a sense of shared values. It is sometimes necessary to repeat such messages at the end of sessions in order that individuals can feel secure in the knowledge that all attending have agreed to abide by the protocol.

Collaboration is visible when all participants are respectfully listened to equally. It is recognised that some very good teachers/educators do not necessarily seek to dominate discussion nor to participate in heated debate but listen quietly and reflect on what others are saying. Facilitators should seek (without embarrassing them) to draw in the silent colleagues and to bring in their perspectives on issues being addressed.

When there is agreement about the form of feedback (for example, “What I liked from what you have said.” and “What I learned from what you have said.”

When ideas are challenged and discussed in a professional manner using evidence from research, from theory and from practice.

When participants have understood that, ‘Honesty is the best policy’.

### **Recommendations for facilitators of professional learning opportunities**

Whether you are a sole teacher who has decided that the time is now and it is you who must take the lead and initiate collaborative teacher learning with your colleagues within your own institution or elsewhere or are an experienced professional learning facilitator or headteacher, the following are considerations for you when planning.

- Build in time for discussion and for reflection on ideas, theorising and ideas into practice.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about/chatham-house-rule>

- Make meetings regular. When time is set aside over a sustained period for a mutually-agreed, important examination of beliefs and/or practice. In piloting the methodological framework of the EFFeCT project, sustained and regular meetings and workshops were held in each of the countries hosting these.
- When, built-in to the teachers' schedule, there is in-school support for the time for collaborative teacher learning opportunities.
- When there are visible and beneficial outcomes seen to emerge as a result of the collaboration. The products created as a result of collaborative teacher learning should minimally be articulated; it is best when they are written and distributed to all involved and disseminated to all of the institutions involved. When individuals see physical outcomes as a result of their endeavours they are more likely to be activated and to implement and test out the products in their own practice, refining them to meet the needs of the particular students whose learning they are facilitating.

When writing about the collaborative teachers learning, it would be remiss not to mention professional learning communities.<sup>6</sup>

When there is a professional learning community established the following components are present.

Components of Professional Learning Communities	
a	interaction
b	engagement in serious dialogue
c	deliberation about information and data
d	communal interpretation
e	distribution (dissemination)
f	mutual trust
g	(mutual) respect
h	(mutual) support
i	inclusivity (sense of all belonging to the collectively-responsible set of professionals)
j	(source-hunger) looking for data beyond the immediate members of the collaboration

*Adapted from Louis, 1994 and Stoll et al, 2006. (NB My brackets.)*

<sup>6</sup> There has been much written about collaborative teachers learning when professional learning communities are developed. There are already whole volumes dedicated to this phenomena.

In addition to the above, when collaborative teachers are learning together there may be found:

	Collaborative Teachers Learning
a	participative partnership
b	deep learning
c	moral purpose
d	equity
e	ownership
f	common purpose
g	evaluation
h	flexible development process
i	exposure to innovative ideas
j	content driven by the participants
k	an honest, open professional sharing culture
l	effective listeners

### Developing in- and out-of-school opportunities for collaborative teacher learning

When there are departments for subject areas usually found in larger secondary schools, it is more likely that colleagues will collaborate when planning the collective strategy for learning and teaching and its implementation. It is in such circumstances natural and good professional practice to share ideas, resources, sources and even teaching practice. Opportunities for observation in order to improve practice or to test out ideas and possibly to share the teaching within the scheduled lessons can be planned for and have been proven to raise the quality of teaching and learning.

Other organisational structures within school systems which designate teachers across a broad range of age groups, for example, 'early years' or 'lower school', are opportunities for collaboration – particularly for planning coherent and meaningful student learning experiences and a whole school approach to the teaching thereof. Here, similarly, arise opportunities for collegial observation, co-teaching and feedback. Although ideally such activities would be supported by the principals or headteachers in managing the necessary timetabling and/or providing teaching for the class of the observer, creative teachers and headteachers find solutions to do this where there is agreement for the practice but no organisational or physical support.

When one wants something enough, one finds new ways of achieving one's goal.

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## Professional Associations

When teachers belong to professional associations for their subject or specialist field, they not only have access to the resources of the Association with regard to curriculum and pedagogy but also to collaboration with colleagues who have similar professional interests. Such professional associations have regular meetings and are responsive to requests for professional learning support with regard to ideas, materials, workshops and courses. When teachers have wider access both to colleagues and their ideas, professional learning may be enhanced and an enhanced sense of belonging to and of participating in that profession may be achieved.

## Modern Technology

Through modern technology, for example, the Internet and the proliferation of computers, tablets and mobile telephones within schools, opportunities arise for collaboration not only with colleagues in other schools locally, regionally, and nationally but also with colleagues across the world. (For example, the European Erasmus e-twinning project<sup>7</sup>, which have teachers in 31 countries involved.) When teachers find themselves in schools which recognise the potential for professional learning through collaboration with teachers in other countries, the benefits accrued outweigh the need to adjust to information and communication technology as a vehicle for both student learning and collaborative teacher learning.

One of the potential structural barriers to collaborative teacher learning is the historic architecture of schools which has largely focused on providing closed or at least closable accommodation on the basis of one teacher and a fixed number of students. When these barriers do not exist, collaboration is more likely to occur. Just because something "has always been like this" there is no necessary reason for it to prevail.

Two examples from teachers' own experiences relate how when teachers are prepared to 'take risks' and move from the status quo; both relate to closed doors (and possibly closed minds).

"In my teacher training, no one had mentioned any teaching scenario that did not imply that, as new teacher, I would not have the security of my classroom door being closed and that I could safely practice my professional autonomy. It came as a shock to me when I found my first teaching post at the headteacher and my mentor told me of the schools open doors and policy. Owing to the support and collaborative learning opportunities given to me by my mentor, I have learned the benefits of such an approach and, as a consequence, feel both safer and empowered to be working in this way."

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm>

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“In our school, the Classroom doors always open. It was not always like this. The new director (headteacher) brought in the idea. We all discussed it and gave it a trial period. Now, no one would go back to closed doors during school hours.”

Collaborative teacher learning can occur when professional autonomy of the teacher is recognised as merely being an acknowledgement of the teachers’ professional knowledge and understanding being applied to the unique set of variables in every ‘physically-isolating’ classroom. Collaborative teacher learning means that each teacher will know or come to know and understand and to be able to develop common and complementary means of enabling students to attain the agreed and desired competencies.

“We were able to produce new learning materials for use in our classes throughout the department. We took the opportunity to share these and the underpinning ideas to a national subject conference. We were later asked by teachers from another country for permission to be able to implement our ideas and we were included in their professional learning programme.”

The extent to which collaborative teachers learning can be implemented has today no physical boundaries.

“Singularity University (“SU”) is a global learning and innovation community using exponential technologies to tackle the world’s biggest challenges and build an abundant future for all. SU’s collaborative platform empowers individuals and organisations across the globe to learn, connect, and innovate breakthrough solutions using accelerating technologies like artificial intelligence, robotics, and digital biology.”<sup>8</sup>

Collaborative teacher learning can thus be self-initiated, project- or problem-centred and, dependent upon the needs of the participants and the contexts in which they are operating, may or may not have reliance upon information and communication technology.

When the teacher implements principles arising from the model of the reflective practitioner and this is implicit in the methodological framework. As several EFFeCT project participants emphasised, professional learning includes:

- “Ensuring teachers understand what reflective practice looks like, feels like and how it can enhance their practice;”
- a “sense of fulfilment” - seeing goals and changes being achieved;
- “professional growth; include theoretical knowledge about reflection - Schön/Brookfield etc.”

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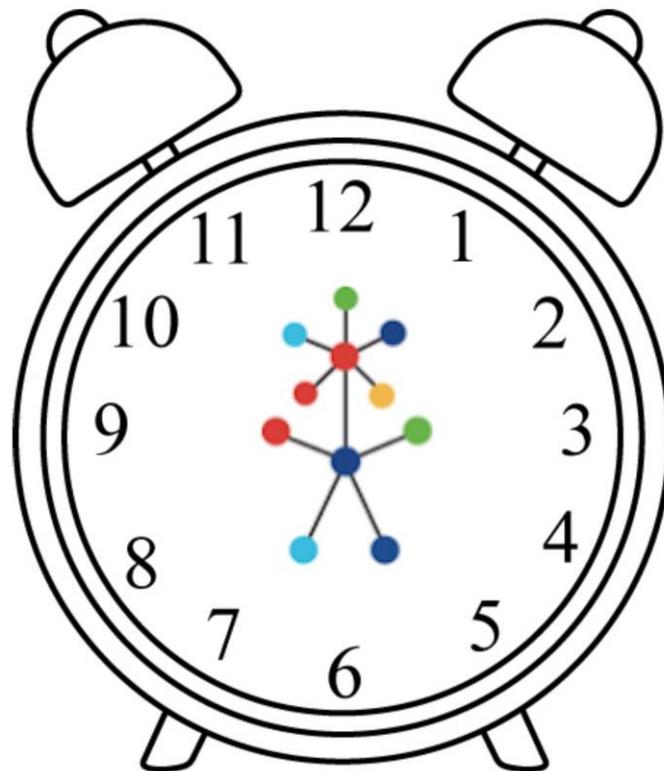
<sup>8</sup>[https://www.singularityuczechsummit.com/uploads/brochure/attachment/1/brochure\\_SU\\_CzechSummit\\_january.pdf](https://www.singularityuczechsummit.com/uploads/brochure/attachment/1/brochure_SU_CzechSummit_january.pdf)

## In summary

Collaborative teacher learning occurs and prevails **when** there is a clearly-determined and agreed, common purpose; **when** there is a moral, professional purpose; **when** those engaged in professional learning take ownership both for their own learning and the process of learning together with consequent outcomes; **when** headteachers create regular scheduled opportunities within the school day and within teachers' contractual annual activities; **when** reflection, research and subsequent reflexivity are an inherent part of the process; **when** there is a structured approach but flexibility is built-in and recognised as a contextual necessity; **when** challenging criteria for evaluation are built into the process at the beginning and **when** there is rigorous application of these criteria, including dissemination; **when**, in any programme, (self-imposed or mandated) time is built-in not only for corporeal refreshment but for individual and collective contemplation and reflection and sharing such; **when** communication is effected through focussed listening and professional non-judgemental feedback; **when** there is a culture of sharing, trust, equity and a desire for deep professional learning between collaborators.

**When is the optimum time for collaborative teachers learning?**

**The optimum time is now!**



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