

## **A new model of collaborative action research; theorising from inter-professional practice-development**

Lofthouse, R. M.; Flanagan, J.; Wigley, B

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## **Abstract**

The development of pedagogies to meet the needs of diverse communities can be supported through inter-professional practice-development. This paper explores one such experience, that of speech and language therapists developing a new video-based coaching approach for teachers and teaching assistants in multi-cultural settings with high numbers of children learning English as an additional language. To support them in developing and trialing the coaching approach the expertise of a teacher-educator and educational researcher was provided through a university business voucher. It is this working relationship that this paper has as its practical focus, as it transformed to one of collaborative action research. The action research is described, providing the context for a discussion of the characteristics of collaborative action research and the proposal of a new model. This model offers a way of conceptualising collaborative action research through time, and of recognising the importance of the partners' zones of proximal, contributory and collaborative activities in sustaining change and knowledge-creation.

## **Key words**

collaborative action research, model, coaching, inter-professional, practice development

## **Introduction**

This paper is based on an experience of deliberate practice development through a consultancy relationship which evolved over time to share characteristics of collaborative action research. We, the protagonists and authors, are two independent speech and language therapists and a university-based teacher educator/researcher. Our specific focus was the development of an inter-professional video-based coaching approach, which would take specialist speech and language expertise to the heart of pedagogic practices in multi-lingual primary and nursery schools. This paper will not give a complete account of the action research, but it forms part of the narrative – focusing on our experience of collaborative action research. In writing we step back from the fray of the practicalities of the project and the press of our wider roles and responsibilities; but find we must also take account of these dimensions. Through an interpretive paradigm we draw substantially on our 'lived experiences' (Kemmis 1993, 188) to understand our own iterative learning process and reflect on our dynamic partnership. We use this to present a model which explores the dimensions of collaborative action research undertaken by partners from different disciplines and professional contexts. As such we aim to make a contribution to understanding an aspect of the methodology of collaborative action research. We write in the first person, but also use each other's names to distinguish our particular activities within the collaboration.

It would be false to claim that our joint endeavour began as intentional action research, or that we had in our sights a new conceptual model. Our partnership was first framed as supporting business development through a consultative process, with the consultation provided to a newly formed independent speech and language therapy business in the East Midlands (UK) by a university based academic from another region, with the majority of the academic's costs being supported by a university business development voucher. To learn about how to develop a suitable video-based coaching approach we needed to open up the process to 'critical scrutiny' (Humes 2014). As we did so it soon became clear that we were on a journey on which we were 'sharing problems and insights and engaging in collaborative enquiry to improve practice' (Humes 2014, 4) as our shared curiosity, deliberation, action, dialogue and reflection emerged. Thus, while our object remained the development a new inter-professional coaching model our working relationship quickly became more enquiry-focused (not simply product-focused) and collaborative in nature, and as such the

opportunities for our own learning expanded. Our enquiry took both practical and conceptual turns. Over time we needed to develop and tweak the model of practice, and this led to decisions to capture evidence of practice and impact at the school level, to help make sense of the progress of our work towards the coaching model, and of its efficacy. Thus we were acting as enquiring practitioners allowing us to ‘take informed intentional actions, explore their effects and form judgements of their value’ (Lofthouse, 2014, 13). Carr and Kemmis (1986, 40) made a strong case for locating ‘teachers as critical figures in the research enterprise’ and in our situation it is we as practitioners working to develop innovative and useful coaching practices who are critical figures.

In the following sections details of the practice development case are given. Firstly we describe it in practical terms, outlining who we are and what we planned to do in partnership in order to develop a new Continuing Professional Development (CPD) approach that could be offered to schools. Then we extend the discussion to consider the means by which we developed a working understanding of the coaching approach and what we learned about its impacts in the initial settings. Finally we consider the emergence of collaborative action research as our methodology for working in partnership across profession. By locating ourselves as critical figures we see our work as a dynamic case study of educational practice from which we have started to build theories. It is through reflecting on this experience that we conclude by offering a new potentially generalisable model (Briggs 2007) which conceptualises the nature of collaborative action research.

### **The case: making sense of the partnership, the context and the CPD approach**

Our partnership began as two unrelated professional journeys, in quite different working worlds, 175 miles apart. Jo and Bibiana are experienced speech and language therapists running a new company to offer bespoke solutions to enable schools, nurseries and parents to support children’s language development. Their work is located in multi-cultural and multi-lingual communities in a relatively economically deprived inner city area in the UK. Rachel is an experienced higher education teacher-educator, designing and teaching programmes for both initial and continuing teacher education. Prior to this she was a secondary teacher. Her academic role includes research, and her specific interest is in professional learning of

teachers and educators, based on both their engagement in and with research and access to, and development of, coaching and mentoring. Jo and Bibiana triggered the collaboration having read a research-based school guide to coaching co-authored by Rachel (Lofthouse et al. 2010a). At an initial meeting a personal bond was formed resulting in a commitment to explore avenues for partnership, including gaining a university business voucher which was used to fund Rachel's time to work on this project.

Our combined aim was the development of a CPD approach that would support teachers and teaching assistants in participating schools to develop pedagogies which improved children's speech, language and communication development. As partners we focused on developing a video-based coaching model, which allowed the speech and language therapists to engage teachers and teaching assistants in conversation regarding video-recorded evidence of their own classroom practices. The iterative construction of this coaching model took place over a year. The approach was informed by models of teacher coaching (Lofthouse et al. 2010b) and video interaction guidance (Kennedy et al. 2009), and was rooted in learning which makes deliberate and explicit work processes, learning activities and learning processes (Eraut 2007).

The aim of the coaching was thus to ensure that research and practice evidence related to children's speech and language development became a vehicle for the teachers' and teaching assistants' professional development. The model offered a new CPD practice which brought the teachers and teaching assistants, school leaders and speech and language therapists into greater collaboration to support the development of research-informed communication-rich pedagogic practices. As such it met some of the characteristics of an 'action-based initiative' which valued the educators, 'helping them to forge and make the most of connections with others and supporting them to make a difference to the lives of children and their families' (Lightfoot and Frost 2015, 415). The coaching was developed in two settings; two federated inner city primary schools (3-11 yrs) and a nursery school (3-4 yrs). In each case the school leaders were actively seeking bespoke CPD which would enable new and experienced staff to respond to the shifting language demands of the settings, where over 85% of the children are learning English as an additional language to their home language. This local language demographic is set in a national context which was described Lindsay et al. (2012) who reported a 72% increase in children with Speech Language and Communication Needs in the

preceding five years. They also found little evidence of structured opportunities and interactions to develop oral language in the classroom.

### **The case: developing a working understanding of the coaching approach and its impacts**

Given our contexts and prior experiences we felt able to base the development of the inter-professional video-based coaching on what Flyvbjerg (2001) recognised as 'practical knowledge deriving from localised, concrete situations' (cited in Humes 2014, 5). We had two combined ambitions; we needed to engage with and develop our practical knowledge to construct our coaching technique, which we hoped in turn would build the practical knowledge of the teachers and teaching assistants engaged in coaching. As our joint interests were to meet the needs of teachers working in complex settings we needed to adopt an evaluative approach in order to understand how appropriate these tools were in engaging teachers and teaching assistants in professional dialogue to support changes in their practice. Our ongoing evaluation was in part facilitated using the 'mental model' of a Theory of Change approach (Laing and Todd 2015), constructed through interviews with the school leaders and the coaching participants (teachers and teaching assistants). This mental model 'privilege[d] the knowledge and experience of stakeholders, who ha[d] their own ideas about how things work' (Laing and Todd 2015, 4) and thus enabled multiple voices to inform the development and evaluation of the CPD intervention. The initial interviews yielded significant evidence of the motivations for participation from both of the headteachers and allowed us to gain an understanding of how the school leaders conceptualised the development of communication-rich pedagogies in their nursery and primary settings. This evidence was used as the basis of return interviews with both the headteachers and coaching participants (teachers and teaching assistants) helping us to understand the contribution of the new inter-professional coaching in enabling and sustaining the desired changes.

Through analysing the interview responses we were able to conclude that specialist video-based coaching can play a significant part in enabling bespoke professional learning. In particular it was evident that the coaching approach created a neutral, non-judgmental space in which teachers' own interactional practices could be exposed and made open to co-

construction based on the relationship between their pedagogic knowledge and skills and the speech and language therapists' knowledge and skills related to speech, language and communication.

Evidence of its efficacy align with Shannon et al.'s (2015) demonstration of the value of on-site coaching, and Lightfoot and Frost's (2015) research on CPD for early years educators from which they propose elements underpinning what they refer to as transformative professional development which include using external expertise linked to school-based activity, using tools for reflection, planning and experimentation, processes to encourage, extend and structure professional dialogue and recognition of the individual educators' starting points. The use of video proved to be critical, with the teachers and teaching assistants noting how important it was to see and hear themselves in practice. This was stressed by a teacher as follows,

*Although video was initially an uncomfortable experience through watching myself I noticed many of my own teaching and learning communication behaviours. I realised I needed to stop answering for children and also to give more thinking time. I questioned the concept of 'pace'. The coaching raised my awareness of the significance of the elements of the SLC training in my classroom. Primary teacher*

In this respect their positive professional learning experience mirrored that demonstrated by Gröschner et al. (2015) who analysed the outcomes for teachers engaged in 'Dialogic Video Cycles' focusing on productive classroom dialogue.

While Kennedy (2014) described coaching CPD models as 'malleable' our analysis of the impacts suggests that the model of inter-professional coaching that has been developed has transformative qualities, if it occurs at a co-constructive and collaborative level (Lofthouse et al. 2010a). As such it can act to alter the conditions for teachers' and teaching assistants' learning, helping practitioners to position themselves in culture of democratic professionalism rather than managerial professionalism (Sachs 2001) and thus help to promote them as agents of change. This is well illustrated in the following quote,

*There has been a definite shift from individual specialist coaching to a staff coaching culture. The setting is open plan and I now notice teachers and teaching assistants commenting to each other while they are working with the children, referring to commonly understood concepts which support speech, language and communication.*

*Because staff are more informed, their conversations with parents about this are also more meaningful. Nursery headteacher*

In addition to the impact on professional learning, practices and conditions described above there was also evidence of impact of the more communication-rich pedagogies on teaching and on the children's outcomes. It is not possible to demonstrate a direct, singular causal relationship between the inter-professional coaching practices and pupils' attainment data as the coaching cannot be isolated from other changes with the settings, including those triggered by the speech and language audit and associated training offered by Jo and Bibiana. One teacher described the initiative as part of 'the big push' through which they were focusing on children's speaking, guided reading, role play, and asking good questions (for example) in a more focused fashion. These settings are typical of the complex 'black box' environments for which traditional evaluations are poorly suited (Laing and Todd 2015, 3). This is why the Theory of Change interview methodology was used to try to establish the multiple mechanisms at work. One teaching assistant indicated this in her interview as follows,

*The discussion with the SLTs about my video clips was very reassuring. They found things I do well which I see as natural. They asked me questions about my practice, they focused my attention on things I had noticed and gave me advice. This worked because the video coaching came at the end of the audit and training process, so I had got to know them and felt comfortable with them. I trusted them and accepted their feedback. I feel more confident and reflective. Nursery teaching assistant*

Each Headteacher and coaching participant interviewed was able to highlight noticeable changes in both pedagogy and in children's outcomes. In the nursery a teacher was conscious that she was making more rapid and reliable assessments of children's language skills and that this led to more productive conversations between herself and colleagues about how to meet their initial learning and support needs. In the primary school the children in the year group (Year 3) whose teachers had been coached were commended by visitors to an assembly for their ability and willingness to articulate good questions in standard English (outstripping the year 4 in this respect). In the same school another teacher reflected that,



*My children are now choosing [her emphasis] to share ideas, they have more confidence and can articulate their ideas better, modelling good language to each other. They are also developing better social skills, because they can now explain themselves and experience less conflict with each other and with staff.*

Perhaps the most passionate advocate of the impacts of the work was the long-established nursery Headteacher who was working in her final year prior to retirement. She had indicated in the initial Theory of Change interview that she was hoping that all her children (most of whom were learning English as an additional language) would demonstrate 2 points of progression in speaking and listening in the year, which had not been achieved before. During the return interviews she stated that every child (including those with Special Educational Needs) had achieved this, and that beyond this the attainment data in every area of the curriculum was ‘amazing’. This progress was highlighted in an Ofsted inspection that year, which upgraded the school from Good to Outstanding, with grade 1 for all areas (including pupil achievement and quality of teaching) and which stated that,

*Staff are reflective and have an excellent understanding of how young children learn; through their involvement with a project they are developing further their understanding of language development and how their practice effects on this skill. This has led to even more detailed and accurate assessments of this area of the children’s development.*

### **The case: collaborative action research**

When we started we had a sense of purpose and product but less of a sense of the opportunity the project offered in terms of knowledge-creation. However, knowledge was not only deployed to design the coaching technique it was also constructed as critical questions emerged through both our necessary enquiry and our professional and academic curiosities. One of these questions centered on the nature and effect of our collaboration and co-construction, and how this enabled us to develop coaching tools suitable for our purpose of inter-professional workplace learning; thus we turned our reflective gaze on ourselves. In doing so we recognised that coaching across professional boundaries is demanding (the facilitating ‘business voucher model’ perhaps relied on it being a more simple matter) and the

development of the coaching approach was greatly supported by our self-study and an action research approach.

In reviewing our experience of developing the coaching approach it feels appropriate to consider firstly the dynamics of the collaboration between an academic and practitioners and secondly the extent to which it has had characteristics of action research. We would deem our work to be collaborative in that we went beyond carving up associated roles, instead we applied our joint labour in working towards a common goal, and were proactive in pooling knowledge and problem solving (Lofthouse et al. 2015, 17). In doing so we articulated and tested out together conceptual thinking that emerged from practice and then used that thinking reciprocally to develop the coaching practices. While it was not the case that the action research was fully participatory in terms of involving the school staff, as collaborative action researchers we have scaffolded our collective voices and those of the coaching participants and their headteachers. This supported the development of new knowledge, and validated the work through the principle of dialectics (Heikkinen et al. 2007, 2012a). The process has offered us a pragmatic, but scholarly approach to systematic practice review and development.

## **Discussion: an attempt to theorise**

### ***Thinking beyond team and task support***

Despite our collaboration only involving three individuals and involving speech and language therapists rather than teachers we have started to make sense of the experience by first reflecting on Bevins and Price's (2014) work on the complex relationships in teacher / academic collaborative action research. Bevins and Price draw on Berg's (2001) framework defining three types of action research. Our combined motivations and consequent process supporting the development of the coaching approach fit Berg's *practical / mutual / collaborative mode* adopted as a means to improve practice. Our relative success is at least in part accounted for by our reciprocal and recursive process of collaboration and enabled by the balance of both task support and team support (as defined by Bevins and Price 2014). These dual dimensions are illustrated in Figure 1, which is an annotated version of their model of Task and Team Support, highlighting the qualities of our collaboration. While not flawless as a joint enterprise it feels possible to claim that our good levels of team and task

support enabled the situation of ‘collaboration’ as indicated as the probable outcome by Bevins and Price, in which ‘the project [was] completed and further work stimulated in teams who seek ways to extend collaboration’ (2014, 275).

*Figure 1 here*

As already stated the original intention was not specifically of action research, but instead of consultancy to create a bespoke and useable CPD approach. Bevins and Price's model proved useful in acknowledging the specific features of task and team support which maintained our joint practice development and allowed for a degree of success. These are identified in the bullet points in Figure 1. This model however a static representation of qualities, articulated as a compound list. The elements of appropriate time allocation, shared workload, skills sets, mutuality and cohesion are likely to have been almost as significant to the success of this project if it had remained as a partnership based on academic / practitioner consultation through which both parties hoped to gain some new working knowledge. However it was not as simple as that. Part-way through the collaborative effort it became clear that we were seeing the work as a process of action research undertaken by ourselves as the lead practitioners. Initial business plans for the coaching techniques to form part of a possible franchise model and a commercial resource for other speech and language practitioners became less of an immediate priority than working on the coaching approach to refine and understand the practice itself. Developing a new CPD offer demanded that we better educated ourselves about its potential, the related challenges (often to do with the context not the coaching) and about the nuances of engaging as a coach and coachee in an inter-professional situation. In understanding how we worked in partnership through educational action research we have had to go beyond Bevins and Price' model in order to adequately conceptualise our experience, as what Figure 1 does not capture is the dynamic nature of the work, nor the influences of practice and context beyond our direct partnership.

### ***Quality and validity through educational action research***

In our professions, and for the teachers and school leaders we were supporting, it is legitimate, indeed essential, to focus on practice development as both the vehicle and

objective for professional learning. We had not set out to undertake formal research, but instead to develop enhanced practices – both in terms of coaching CPD and communication-rich pedagogy. To do so entailed ‘a deliberate focus on the details, characteristics and outcomes of practice through engagement in cycles of action, often in some form of collaboration with others’ (Lofthouse 2015). These actions provided us with an ‘imposed relevance’ while our combined curiosities created ‘intrinsic relevance’ (Schutz 1970, 26, cited in Hammersley 2004, 169-70). In practical terms the work was small-scale, but its relevance came from not only addressing ‘local concerns but also intractable issues’ (Thomson 2015, 310). In pursuing these relevancies through enquiry we began to generate living-educational-theories, which Whitehead (2015) suggests means we undertook ‘educational research’ rather than ‘education research’. In the transition between a consultancy relationship to collaborative action research we had gone beyond the instrumental. While the question of how to achieve changes in the practices of pedagogic communication in the specific settings still mattered our stance became one of more open enquiry. As such we engaged in a ‘continual process of making current arrangements problematic’ and assumed ‘that part of the work of practitioners individually and collectively is to participate in educational and social change’ (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009, 121).

Issues of quality and validity in action research became relevant. In undertaking and reflecting on our work we drew on Heikkinen et al.’s (2007, 2012a) ‘five validation principles for action research’ of historical continuity, reflexivity, dialectics, workability and ethics, and evocativeness. We also considered the extent to which we could demonstrate quality through the ethical framework proposed by Mockler (2014); quality of evidence, quality of purpose and quality of outcome. These two conceptual frames proved powerful personal sense-making tools helping us to recognise three critical characteristics of our collaborative action research;

- Authenticity; the ever-evolving realities of school contexts and our positionality as practitioners / researchers to the work over time.
- Inclusivity; the significance of our participant dialogue, the underlying relational ethics, the invitation extended to each other to be part of each other’s wider lives, and the extent to which the value of the work could be scrutinised in the target workplaces by the coaches and managers.

- Co-construction; the narratives underlying and extending beyond the work and the extent to which we developed critical perspectives through collaboration.

Each of these characteristics is discussed below.

***Authenticity*** A core feature of authenticity is the reality check; asking ourselves as action researchers what are we aiming to achieve and why is it relevant? Our action research was underpinned by three ethical principles (Lofthouse et al. 2012). We had a strong allegiance with our cohorts of teachers and teaching assistants and via them their learners. We sustained in action our beliefs that the practices associated with supporting them could be improved and that evidence-based reflection on our own practice was the focus for improvement. At the same time the coaching was designed to promote reflection on their practice by the coachees. In addition we recognised the strategic priorities of the institutions for which we work; namely the university, the schools and the emerging speech and language consultancy business, as well as the institution of education more generally. Thus we believe our action research was grounded in the ethics of the improvability of practice, the desire to meet the needs of the professional communities, and a developing understanding of the demands and cultures of their workplaces. Such ethical considerations provide a particular lens through which to address the issue of research quality based on the principles for validation of action research (Heikkinen et al. 2007 and 2012a). Without these there would be no pragmatic workability, only academic enquiry.

As we worked together it became increasingly clear that our endeavour to create and understand the inter-professional coaching model was heavily influenced by our previous and contemporaneous work in our own separate settings, not just by the act of collaboration itself. This was the basis for the original consultancy relationship. The references to that work in this article are not just academic self-citation, these publications were frequently poured over to glean intelligence that could be applied, or to promote discussion of emerging contradictions. They formed part of what Heikkinen et al. refer to as the validation principles of *historical continuity* and *reflexivity*. As Rachel's previous research had indicated the value of non-hierarchical coaching in schools by teachers for teachers, she was curious, indeed cautious, about how coaching across professional boundaries might work, especially as its purpose was for teachers to learn from the expertise of the speech and language therapists (which could be interpreted as an expert/novice relationship). At the same time Rachel was working with a number of other schools to develop bespoke teacher-coaching models, and

also with student teachers engaging in both mentoring and lesson study. These other situations created multiple opportunities for conversations and reflection with practitioners, and led to another research project focusing on their experiences of collaboration (Lofthouse and Thomas, 2015). In exploring these experiences the theme of parity emerged, both as epistemic parity (based on knowledge and expertise) and juridical parity (based on roles and responsibilities) (Heikkinen et al. 2012b). This also became relevant as we explored the potential knowledge imbalance in the inter-professional coaching model. It became clear (for example) that Jo and Bibiana became more confident as coaches as they in turn learned substantially from the teachers and teaching assistants about pedagogy and curriculum, and we explored this and other aspects through the concept of parity in our conversations. Jo and Bibiana were concurrently developing a 360-degree audit tool providing schools with a holistic report on the learning environment in relation to speech and language development. Reflections from the outcomes of these audits also fuelled our conversations about the development of coaching, leading us to construct a Venn diagram which was subsequently used with the teachers and teaching assistants to scaffold joint analysis of the video clips used as the basis of coaching sessions.

***Inclusivity*** Beyond these (and other) contemporary influences we began to be aware of the broader perspectives that we brought to the project from our individual personal and professional histories and our ambitions for future developments and learning in our own contexts. One of the potentially problematic features of this project in relation to task and team support (Bevins and Price, 2014) was the geographical distance between us as collaborators. This might have been overcome through the use of technology to facilitate meetings, and while we did make use of email and twitter we did not use Skype (although we had planned to), instead using the business voucher to ensure that Rachel could travel for full day meetings, averaging at one every two months for a year. These often seemed like a luxury given the distance and the demands of our jobs beyond the project, and because Jo and Bibiana could not 'trade' as a business on those days. However these visits did mean that we got to know each other very well, and we started to share family experiences (e.g. as parents of school-aged children) as well as professional ones. This went beyond building our team spirit, into helping us to keep the ways that practitioners could better support children in the settings as the core concern of our work. At a relatively early stage Rachel was able to invite

Bibiana and Jo to a multi-disciplinary conference on Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) (Kennedy et al. 2011) and Video Enhanced Reflective Practice (VERP) (Kennedy et al. 2015) hosted at the university. Just as her own previous training in VIG methods had informed her practice and understanding of using video to aid productive dialogue the models provided a counterpoint for Bibiana and Jo. They were enthused by the examples of practice, but conscious already of how our emerging inter-professional coaching approach had alternative features.

Over time our individual goals and the needs of our different workplaces also became critical. Jo and Bibiana were developing their business and starting to determine the specific and complementary role of coaching within a suite of commercially-viable professional and school development tools focused on speech and language at their disposal. While they believed strongly in the validity of the coaching model they could not dedicate as much time to it as they wanted to because of its relative high cost to schools, who frequently preferred to commission whole-staff training rather than one-to-one coaching. Rachel was experiencing the intense pressure of the research culture of a Russell Group university, which has the aim of being a civic university with a global impact, and was also conscious of the significance of the expectations of research excellence. So, while the development of the coaching model was a specific concrete goal, it could not occur in isolation and neither could our focus on, or the satisfaction derived from, our collaborative project lead us to compromise our other responsibilities. On the other hand the drivers that we each experienced did converge in that we recognised the value of gathering evidence of the impact of the coaching approach in the settings which had adopted it. This evaluation is not the specific focus of this paper, but did lead to the use of interviews with the headteachers and participating teachers using a Theory of Change analytical framework. It also encouraged us to plan conference contributions, one of which led us to make a short video in which we described our progress and through which participating teachers began to reflect on their personal experiences of coaching and the impacts that it was having on their practice. The research infrastructure of the university meant that prior to attending an academic conference to present on the work Rachel invited Bibiana and Jo to co-present seminar in her research centre, at which the first version of the video was shown and the project discussed with colleagues and students.

**Co-construction** In considering the authenticity and inclusivity of the work above the nature of our collaborative process of developing inter-professional coaching as a new model of practice becomes clear. It might have seemed relatively 'project-planned' at the outset (indeed that was what allowed access to the business voucher) but was in fact more organic and permeable as an endeavour than we originally anticipated it would be. At times it felt that our learning conversations became tangential to our focus, but in fact without drawing on, pulling in and reaching out to wider influences we would probably not have achieved what we did. Perhaps more accurately, we may have constructed a practical approach to inter-professional coaching, but we might not have learned as much along the way. Given the commercial sensitivities of any professional training offer in a period of tightening educational budgets our divergent learning outcomes are as important as our more convergent intention, as new contexts require divergence. As Cook (1998, 2009) proposes there is a purpose to a 'messy area' in the action research process. She suggests that it creates a 'forum for the exchange of perceptions and beliefs, a place of co-construction where strands of knowledge are unearthed and critiqued' (2009, 281). Co-construction (in terms of dimensions of dialogue) was defined by Lofthouse et al. (2010a) as conversation that becomes a professional knowledge-creating process, which is likely to be advantageous to both parties and which leads to new action and an opportunity to review it. Without an ongoing process of co-construction the action research could not have been truly collaborative.

Our experience suggests that it was not only knowledge which was co-constructed, but also our identities and positions in relation to the project. Heikkinen et al. (2007 and 2012) propose that the principle of reflexivity is critical in the validation of action research and we would argue is an essential characteristic of collaborative action research. Lash (2003), writing about modernity, describes reflexivity as 'non-linear' and being typical of systems in which chaos is normal. Although at the start our plans for developing the coaching model (as articulated in the business voucher application) were articulated as linear and product focused, the action research journey has not been. Instead we have responded to an ever-evolving context, both at a systemic level and at a personal level. As the conditions within which we practiced shifted it was clear that some expected actions and ways of working were no longer in our gift. Within this changing context we developed a reflexive position which as Vanassche and Kletcherans (2014) state 'is a crucial factor in understanding the rationale of [our] practices' (2014, 119). Through our action research we have created what Lash (2003) describes as precarious knowledge. This precarious knowledge relates to our 'social, political and professional



agendas' (Sachs 2001, 159) through which we have created, through reflexivity, iteration and reciprocity of practice and research, our evolving professional identities.

### **A new model of collaborative action research**

Reflecting on the dimensions of the work exemplified above has led us to develop a contextually situated model of practice development through a practical / mutual / collaborative mode of action research (Berg 2001). The model as illustrated in Figure 2 is not annotated to describe our specific experiences but has been generalised. However it represents the forward momentum which our working contexts demanded; our research was iterative, but not particularly cyclical, and for both commercial and academic reasons we had to make substantial concrete progress on a number of fronts. It also shows the reciprocity of the partnership, each partner drawing on experiences from beyond the specifics of the project as well as building practical knowledge and understanding from their specific roles and perspectives during the collaboration itself. Finally it models the divergence of outcomes, beyond the achievement of the predetermined goal.

Figure 2 here

The new model of collaborative action research (Figure 2) is based on the premise that there is a specific period of time and set of actions that could be described as the '*Zone of Collaborative Activity*' when both partners (A and B) set aside time to undertake a joint enterprise. This zone is the central component of the model and it is here that there is the greatest strong task and team support (Bevins and Price 2014), and it is characterised by shared labour for a common purpose. Specific activities undertaken are represented as dots, and the links between these are represented by the arrows. In this respect the model is not fully representative, rather it is illustrative. In reality there would be many more dots and arrows criss-crossing the zones. In our case this Zone was mostly filled with face-to-face development and review meetings (activities), during which we planned for coaching, discussed the videos of coaching and the associated classroom practices and engaged in relevant strategic conversation. Given typical funding and project timelines (often related to institutional development or improvement plans) this Zone Of Collaborative Activity would

be formally recognised as occurring during a period of time identified on the model as *'During Collaboration'*. It is more than likely that during their period of collaboration the partners do not always work collaboratively on the action research project. Each partner will typically take on activities that make a direct contribution to, or are a direct response to, the collaborative activity, but which draw on their individual skills or designated roles. In the model these are identified as occurring in *'Zones Of Contributory Activity (A&B)'*. The model configures these zones as symmetrical boxes but in reality there may not be equal contributory activity by each partner. In our case Jo and Bibiana, as speech and language therapists, were working directly in the schools undertaking the coaching (activity dots), and their Zone of Contributory Activity would have been bigger than Rachel's, who undertook contributory activities which were less time-consuming, for example, by facilitating the Theory or Change interviews. Contributory Activities are critical in affecting the nature and quality of the Collaborative Activity, and visa versa. In other words they exist in a reliant and reciprocal relationship. This is exemplified in our case by the capturing of coaching itself on video, without which our conversations would have been less evidence-based, offering less opportunity for the necessary scrutiny of the emerging coaching practices.

These two zones of collaborative and contributory activity could be said to define the action research, but this would imply that activities undertaken by the partners prior to and following on from the designated period of activity were neither an influence on, nor influenced by the collaborative action research. This is highly unlikely. The partners will have engaged with relevant activities prior to forming the partnership, indeed it is these that the partnership is designed to exploit or extend. In our case it was the deliberate combination of knowledge of school-based coaching based on academic research with the pedagogic problems situated in settings that the speech and language therapists had a good working knowledge of that were being deliberately combined. Both of these pre-date the collaboration *per se* and formed the practical knowledge base which fed the collaborative action research. Just as importantly related activities undertaken following the collaborative period might be influenced by the learning that resulted from the action research. It is when such 'expansion' of activities occurs that the collaborative action research could be said to be 'educational research' (Whitehead 2015) or 'educative' (Hammersley 2003). The model defines *'Zones of Proximal Activity (A&B)'* occurring *'Before Collaboration'* and *'After Collaboration'* and the

permeable boundaries indicated by the dashed lines following collaboration suggest both the potential for the ready transfer of ideas and practices from the outcomes of collaboration and the fact that partners will have altered the nature of their working relationship. In our case the period after the funded collaboration has included contributions to research conferences and associated co-authorship. In practical terms diverse work is being undertaken independently with schools by both partners 175 miles apart, and is now heavily informed by the practical knowledge and living-educational-theories generated through the collaborative action research. These ‘expanded activities’ are represented by the larger dots on the diagram.

## **Conclusions and implications**

Two themes are considered in conclusion; firstly the significance of modelling as a methodological approach, and secondly lessons for partnership derived from our experience of collaborative action research in the new complex educational landscape.

### ***The value of a new model***

Developing our new model of collaborative action research has offered us a tool for the ‘iterative process of theorising and verification’ (Briggs 2007, 590), and as such we have deliberately ventured into knowledge-construction (Eriksson 2003, cited in Briggs 2007), through the development of theorised practice based on a dynamic case study. While the model is not based on systematic analysis of qualitative data (the key methodological approach advocated by Briggs), it is driven by our interpretivist stance as action researchers. We have used our experience to make sense of the complexity of collaborative action research as a phenomenon, generating a diagrammatic representation not just reflecting our direct experience but also both our theorised abstract and abstracted knowledge (David 2001, cited in Briggs 2007). Collaborative action research, whether formally funded or not, relies on the application of a resource, including participants’ time. While generating new knowledge and understanding for its own sake might seem an academic ideal it will rarely be seen as such by school or business managers and budget holders. In our professional domains the impact on practice and the legacy for partnerships matter. Therefore, beyond its value to us, we have undertaken the modelling with an intention proposed by Briggs, which is to offer the outcome to other researchers and practitioners planning for, engaging in, or

reviewing collaborative action research. Through visual representation, combining relational diagrammatic elements and text summaries, the model offers others the means to conceptualise the elements that might influence the relative success of the collaboration (whether the process or the learning outcomes).

### ***Lessons for partnership***

To end our discussion we return to our needs as a teacher educator/researcher and speech and language therapists to reconsider our typical roles in a time of dramatic shifts in educational and service-provision policy. Ellis and McNicholl (2015) and Fenwick (2007) address the changing demands of school-university collaborations and each propose Engeström's (2004, 2007) Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) based concept of co-configuration as a new form of organisational learning, which has the potential to reframe the work as 'mutual interdependence of organisations creating a partnership of some form involving ongoing relationships of mutual exchange' (Fenwick 2007, 140). They also draw on Engeström's related CHAT concept of 'knot-working'. While the immediate focus of this project was the collaboration between the newly established business partners and a university academic (rather than a direct partnership between a university and school) knot-working is an apt construct. In our working relationship we experienced distributed authority and expertise, and frequently found ourselves to be negotiating and sharing existing knowledge as well as practical and theoretical propositions. Despite our highly dialogic approach our focus remained on the material objects (the practices of coaching itself and associated tools). Looking back we recognised learning outcomes typical of knot-working in that our learning was transformative, rapidly generating more complexity in our understanding than we anticipated, and provided us with new capacities for future roles. As emerging entrepreneurs and an academic we are all challenged by neo-liberal educational policies, and feel the tension of needing to sustain successful income generating practices in this context while continuing to satisfy our own personal and professional drivers to do work that make a substantial difference to young people's life chances and the capacities of educators and educational institutions to do the same. Our collaborative action research has gone some way to achieve this. We are still journeying.

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