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Forming a collaborative action research partnership

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This article describes the complex nature of collaborative relationships, the difficulties of conducting research with others, and the complications of partnerships in educational research. To create and sustain a communicative space in which participants can collaborate to innovate education and curriculum, time and opportunity to develop trust in the group are needed. We report on a collaborative action research project in the Netherlands in which 14 teachers, three facilitators and an academic researcher formed a partnership, and together designed Language 1 education. We find contextual and the communicative conditions are important in the collaborative action research partnership. We use metaphors of facilitative actions – map, magnifying glass, mirror and compass – formulated by Wadsworth to analyze and describe the collaboration. We show that the participants had to come to terms with their roles and responsibilities and, through dialogue and reflection, evolved and learned to contribute to the collaborative action research partnership by sustaining dialogue and utilizing their unique expertise.

Keywords: collaborative action research partnership; communicative space; contextual conditions; communicative conditions; communicative actions; Language 1 education; metaphors

Introduction

> In the parking lot after a meeting of research group East, Kate [facilitator] and I [academic researcher – Tamara] have a discussion about the research group. Kate expresses concern about the progress of the project, she feels the teachers don't see her as an integral part of the project and the teachers seem to turn to me for direction and guidance. I admit this happens but argue that Kate herself may be responsible for this situation since she often assumes the role of critical friend when I feel she should be more a facilitator focusing on the research procedures and firmly leading the meeting. Kate agrees but adds that she has difficulty taking up her role because I am present and perceived as a major stakeholder in the project. She urges me to be less of a facilitator and giving her the opportunity to assume her role. I reply that I will be happy to do that as long as she will take responsibility for the process as a facilitator and not only as a critical friend. (Field notes, 1 December 2006)

This conflict occurred in the second year of a collaborative action research project in which 14 secondary teachers, three facilitators familiar with action research and Tamara (academic researcher and first author) came together to negotiate new views and practices in secondary Language 1 (L1) education. The conversation reveals the

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complex nature of collaborative relationships, the difficulties of conducting research with others, and the complications of partnerships in educational research. We learned a great deal from such conflicts, which were not surprising although unexpected. They helped us consider another aspect of what transpired in 18 months of collaboration, and illustrate that as the interpretive frameworks connect, they shift and expand – 'particularly through conflict and contrasting perspectives' (Kooy 2006, 663; Nystrand 1997).

This article reports on a collaborative action research project and the process that the various stakeholders experienced, because we learned from it and from each other. Goldstein points out that: 'collaborations in which university-based researchers enter into participatory relationships with classroom teachers have become increasingly prevalent in educational action research' (2000, 517). Furthermore, the educational research literature shows that these partnerships can be very effective but that they are not without challenge and conflicts (Goldstein 2000; Johnsen and Normann 2004; Orland-Barak et al. 2004; McLaughlin 2007). The complexities intensify when research teacher participants have neither met nor worked together. While expected to work collaboratively to innovate education and curriculum, they need time and opportunity to develop trust in the group. This complicates the formation of a communicative space (Habermas 1987, 1996; Kemmis 2001; Kemmis and McTaggart 2005) in a partnership in which people feel confident enough to exchange views and 'can work together to achieve mutual understanding and consensus' (Kemmis 2001, 100). To form a communicative space 'in which dialogue and development can flourish' (Reason and Bradbury 2008, 3), many different actions are undertaken by participants. Because this is a complex process, our objective was to determine and identify how the participants collaborated. All 18 of us participated in one way or another, did similar things and also did things differently. We wanted to get a view of this complicated process and the collaboration of these participants, and we therefore tried to sketch the patterns of collaboration exhibited by the participants. By describing our experiences we may be able to aid other collaborative partnerships in their research (McLaughlin 2007), and advance knowledge on the formation of communicative spaces in partnerships as suggested by Kemmis (2007) in which all the participants contribute their expertise and challenge each other to form a collaborative and productive environment for learning and development.

The study reported here inquires into collaboration in educational partnerships by considering the following research questions:

(1) How do participants in a research partnership collaborate to create a communicative space?
(2) What can be learned from the challenges and possibilities in partnerships between teachers, college instructors (facilitators) and academic researchers?

Background

For the past 30 years, Dutch secondary L1 curriculum has increasingly become skill-driven: that is, 'L1 education has become an efficient means to train the communication skills of future students and employees' (Hulshof and Verloop 2005, 25). The choice of such a highly instrumental curriculum is related to a general policy and curriculum change in Dutch secondary education. This policy began in 1998 and focused on developing more responsibility and initiative in the students – learning to

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learn and independent learning – and on helping the students handle and consume large amounts of information (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2008). This change required teachers to become 'a guide in the learning process, while remaining an expert in his or her specific school subject area' (Oolbekkink-Marchand 2006, 10; Rubio 1996).

The new approach to secondary education encountered many problems. Both teachers and pupils complained about the workload and the lack of intellectual challenge in the curriculum. To solve some of the problems in Dutch schools, the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences issued a report (RNAAS 2003), suggesting two key concepts for educational improvement:

(1) *Concept-context-rich education* – in this study we define this as a form of education in which subject matter (concepts) can be offered to the pupils in different contexts (social, academic or personal) to deepen subject knowledge, enhance transfer and/or increase pupil motivation to learn (RNAAS 2003) – for example, argumentative texts in newspapers.
(2) *The teacher as developer* – to connect the subject matter to changing, 'dynamic' contexts (RNAAS 2003, 17), teachers must be able to treat the subject matter with flexibility and adjust their approach to the learning experience and content. The study materials can never be as flexible as teachers themselves in connecting the subject matter to different contexts. Teachers therefore need to develop skills and learn to use the study materials as background or source information.

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The action research of the participants described in this study aimed at improving Dutch L1 education. The goal was to develop education that would be more motivating and relevant for students to receive and inspiring and challenging for teachers to teach. We invited teachers to develop materials for secondary L1 education that would allow them and us to explore the notion of concept-context-rich education further. Fourteen teachers volunteered to participate in this project to expand their skills as developers, teachers and (action) researchers.

Theoretical framework

We anticipated that a partnership consisting of teachers from secondary schools, college instructors, and university educational researchers could foster knowledge development with practical implications for schools. The knowledge would be created in schools through action research, and teachers would be able to apply it immediately in that same environment (Day 1999). Collaborative action research between university and school faculty is characterized by its focus on the practical problems of individual teachers or schools and also its emphasis on professional development and support for collaboration between teachers and university staff (Clift et al. 1990). Research suggests (Ponte et al. 2004) that action research is most productive when supported by a facilitator who helps and guides the practitioner's reflection, provides information about collaborative action research, and focuses on the necessary strategies. Research also shows that these facilitators often start out as a 'critical friend' and that it can take some time for them to develop into the role of facilitator, guiding the participants through the process (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Messner and Rauch 1995; Ponte 2002; McNiff and Whitehead 2006). Rahman (2008) points out that

facilitators need to experience the process of doing action research themselves to fully understand how to facilitate self-inquiry.

Day (1991) claims that: 'research and staff development can be one and the same enterprise, and that it can be practical and emancipatory for all participants if it follows a *partnership model*' (Day 1991, 545; Campbell et al. 2007). Partnerships between individual university researchers and school teachers are not new (McLaughlin, Black-Hawkins, and Townsend 2005; McLaughlin 2006; Campbell et al. 2007; Day and Townsend 2007; Boyle-Baise and McIntyre 2008) but it is apparent from the research literature that they come in very different forms (McLaughlin, Black-Hawkins, and Townsend 2005; McLaughlin et al. 2007). We note three different approaches to such partnerships: (a) academic researchers facilitate and support teachers performing action research (Brooker et al. 1998; Macpherson, Aspland, et al. 1998; Mason 2005; Day and Townsend 2007); (b) an academic researcher participates in the project as a 'critical friend' (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; McNiff and Whitehead 2006) to sharpen the focus on the problem at hand (Brooker et al. 1998); and (c) academic researchers contribute their skills to the partnership, taking part as consultants in practice (Hall 2001). These different approaches to partnerships obliged us to find our own way of shaping the roles of the participants while being part of research in, on and with practice (Doyle 2007; Honerød and Hoveid 2007). For our study we decided on a three-group partnership in which teachers were facilitated in their action research by action research experts (college instructors) and in which an academic researcher would also participate. The focus would be on data collection and thus participant observation. We anticipated that this approach would give optimal room for diverse dialogue and collaboration.

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Method

We apply qualitative methods – more specifically, grounded theory methods as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) – to collect data and remain open to recurring themes and questions. All participants were included in talking about the process and the data collection. With the help of 'sensitizing concepts' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 36) that emerged from the data and the research literature, we discerned significant themes and, with these concepts in mind, actively searched for examples that aligned and conflicted with our ideas of the concepts.

Contextual and communicative conditions

A collaborative action research project requires time and effort from participants to get underway and be carried forward. Two interrelated conditions can be discerned in these processes that are important for the formation and sustaining of a collaborative action research partnership:

(1) *Contextual conditions* – a supportive context for the research project needs to be created: workshops to familiarize participants with action research, meetings of the research groups and cooperation and support of the schools and colleagues of the participants. In this study, the participants invested 70 hours a year in the research project. A set of research articles was compiled as part of the contextual conditions to create an inspiring context for the participants, and this set was distributed at the beginning of the second year.

(2) *Communicative conditions* (in speech or writing) – at least as important as contextual conditions is the willingness of participants to engage in free and open communication and dialogue. Habermas (1984) refers to such interaction as 'communicative action', through which the truth can be revealed and an unforced consensus can be reached (Godin et al. 2007, 453).

Process of the study

The project occurred between February 2006 and July 2007 (18 months). The teachers volunteered to participate to develop concept-context-rich materials in a collaborative action research setting. They were divided into three regional groups and each was accompanied by a facilitator (college instructors) and Tamara – an academic researcher and the first author. The facilitators were recruited at a course on action research and facilitation of action research. While the facilitators were remunerated, teachers participated voluntarily. Table 1 depicts the three research groups, numbers of meetings, facilitators, and participants.

Initial meetings occurred in January 2006. Every participant (including facilitators) attended one meeting, which the first author (Tamara) facilitated. We discussed ideas about concept-context-rich education and collaborative action research in short workshops. From February 2006 to June 2007 the three collaborative research groups met separately once a month to research and discuss their practice and to develop and evaluate 'concept-context-rich' education. In the meetings, the facilitator helped the teachers by offering advice and guidance in creating their action research projects.

The participants implemented their action research in their daily classes to research the possibilities of 'concept-context-rich' education: (a) they explored possibilities in their teaching practices and reflected on what was needed for specific subject matter,

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Table 1. Research group, meetings, facilitators and participants.

Research group	Number of meetings	Facilitator	Participant	Novice or experienced[a]	Different or same school
West	11	Alice	Abby	Novice	All from different schools
			Nina	Experienced	
			Paul	Experienced	
			Eve	Experienced	
East	9	Kate	Diane	Experienced	All from the same school except Brenda
			Wilma	Experienced	
			Bert	Experienced	
			Amy	Experienced	
			Brenda	Experienced	
South	10	Ann (first year), Rachel (second year)	Macy	Experienced	Macy and Sasha from the same school – remainder from different schools
			Sasha	Novice	
			Hanna	Novice	
			Alan	Experienced	
			Naomi	Experienced	

[a]Novice teacher, up to seven years' experience; experienced teacher, at least seven years' experience.

a pupil or a pupil group; (b) each teacher formulated an individual plan and designed related materials; (c) they implemented their lessons and evaluated the developed materials and their effects during and after their use by surveying the pupils – in the research group meetings they reflected on the findings of their explorations, plans and the responses of the pupils with the 'critical friends' (the other teachers, the facilitator, and the academic researcher); and (d) after these reflections they planned new steps for development for improvement, and thus entered a cyclic process of exploration, development, improvement and reflection. Stories about successes were shared and reflected upon. Several times participants incorporated ideas of other participants in their own research and shared their findings in return.

On two other occasions during the 18 months, research groups West, East and South met each other. Tamara (first author) coordinated and led these meetings, which took place at the end of the first year (June 2006) and the end of the second year (June 2007). In these meetings participants, facilitators and Tamara discussed the processes and ideas concerning concept-context-rich L1 education.

To prepare for this research, information about concept-context-rich education was collected, and we used this to write an article about the notion of concept-context-rich education, published in a Dutch journal for teachers of L1 education (Platteel, Hulshof, and Van Driel 2006). The teachers received the article before the project started. To provide a rich context for the action research, a set of research articles on action research, L1 education, and context-enriched education was compiled and distributed among the participants at the beginning of the second year. We did not distribute this set earlier because at first we did not want to influence the participants too much, but we realized over time that distributing the articles would support the teachers' learning. We will say more about this process in the findings. Also an electronic learning environment was set up, so participants could contact and respond to each other.

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Participants

The project started with 14 teachers (see Table 1). Brenda ended her participation soon after it began for personal reasons and two other teachers (Alan and Naomi) left the project in the second year because for these two the research project fell short of their expectations. Some teachers responded to an invitation sent to the web association of L1-education teachers and others responded to an invitation sent to their school.

The teachers came from different regions of the country and were divided into three separate groups based on distance to work or home (in the west of The Netherlands, in the east of The Netherlands and in the south of The Netherlands) to keep the travel distance for the participants minimal. Although the teachers volunteered for an action research project, with the exception of Abby, none had experienced the process.

Each group had its own facilitator, guiding the teachers in their action research. The facilitators were assigned to the research groups based on distance to home or work. They had done action research themselves and had facilitated students' research projects. They were familiar with action research literature on facilitation. As college instructors, none of them had dealt with secondary education and concept-context-rich education. The design of this particular project, where teachers participated voluntarily and did not receive a grade or a reward, was new to these facilitators. In September 2006, Ann changed employers and was replaced by Rachel, another experienced facilitator.

Tamara, an academic researcher and first author of this paper, developed, initiated and participated in the research project as part of her PhD program. She began as a participant observer but very soon became part of the research and collaboration process. This process will be discussed in more detail in the findings. She began sharing her experience in and knowledge of action research.

Data

To guard against researcher bias we combined various methods and data sources. Table 2 presents the participants and the data sources.

By observing the actual collaboration of all the participants and including the data from the student surveys, we ensured source triangulation. To ensure method triangulation (Taylor and Bogdan 1984; Whitmore and McKee 2001), we compared collaboration observed in several data sources, listed in the first vertical column of Table 2.

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Oral data

A semi-structured interview was conducted with each teacher before the research began. The interview focused on views and knowledge of concept-context-rich education and experiences with collaborative action research. To conclude the research, a final individual interview with each teacher was also held. In this interview, we discussed concept-context-rich education and collaborative action research. We conducted a mid-project interview with the teachers about the action research project and also held a final group interview with the facilitators; to discuss experiences of the process as well as what we learned from the research process. The meetings and interviews were audio-taped for analysis and interpretation.

Written data

The written data consisted of the following: (1) Short descriptions by teachers of their practices (research memos), plans, evaluations, survey findings, evaluative texts and

Table 2. Participants and data sources.

	Participant		
Data source	Academic researcher	Facilitator	Teacher
Oral			
Interview before project	x		x
Interview after project	x		x
Group interview	x	x	x
Meetings (audio-tapes)	x	x	x
Written			
Sketches of practice			
Emails	x	x	x
Plans, evaluations			x
Student surveys			x
Vignettes	x		x
Field notes	x	x	x

emails containing ideas and questions. These documents were distributed to the participants. (2) Two fictional cases (vignettes) written by Tamara and responded to by the teachers in which two possible interpretations of concept-context-rich education were sketched. The teachers responded to these cases by writing what they deemed positive in the interpretations and what they could envision as possible adjustments and elaborations. (3) Field notes created by Tamara after each meeting; the facilitators created field notes occasionally. A member check resulted in minor revisions of two of the field notes in response to participant comments explaining what they had meant by certain comments.

Analysis

The complexity of data analysis is particularly pronounced in the case of interaction of participants. Consequently, we iterated and reiterated during the data collection process to develop a reliable coding system to research how participants in a research partnership collaborate to create a communicative space. Seven meetings were transcribed and analyzed – one of every group from the first year, one of every group from the second year, one meeting with all the research groups (West, East and South), plus one final group interview with the facilitators. This allowed us to describe the collaboration in each separate group and in the whole research group.

While categorizing these interactions we found that the facilitators and Tamara took a lot of time to focus on the goals of our research and on those of the individual action-research projects of the teachers. We also saw many examples of personal reflection and of sharing views and ideas. We expressed that the participants wanted to really grasp the nature of the problem and have a detailed look at the research problem and the improvements made. By asking questions about the research, plans and collected data we tried to help each other to get a detailed and informed view of the problem and possible solution. We furthermore saw the teachers learning to do action research. While reading, analyzing and categorizing the data we started looking for a way to categorize the different acts of collaboration. One way to do so was Wadsworth's use of metaphors: compass (about goals), mirror (about reflection), magnifying glass (about focus), and map (about finding your way) (Wadsworth 1997, 2001) visualized many of the collaborations described above that were conducted by the participants. While analyzing and working with these metaphors we were compelled to define the metaphors more explicitly and in detail. Wadsworth utilized the metaphors to describe large processes in the action research facilitation. We utilized the metaphors to describe the detailed collaboration, talk and actions of the participants. This led us to abandon Wadsworth's framing and conceptualizing definitions and shape them to serve as a tool for analysis of our data. This brought us to the following coding system. We listed: the participant (pseudonyms were assigned to the teachers to ensure confidentiality); contextual or communicative condition; the communication of each participant; and metaphor.

We were drawn to the metaphors because of their transparency and familiarity; they are easy to grasp and appeared to fit the data. In her 2001 article, Wadsworth described compass work as assisting in the shaping, framing, conceptualizing and designing of action research processes. She referred to the descriptions, models, concepts and theories that appear as a result of these processes as 'the maps we make of the charted territory' (Wadsworth 2001, 426). The facilitator enters into an

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'engaged, intersubjective process with the participants, and together hold up mirrors and magnifying glasses to themselves and each other' (2001, 431).

In an academic research group, three other academic researchers and the first author discussed these metaphors and their applicability to the data. We agreed to use the metaphors in the coding. To assess and strengthen the validity of the analyses, another independent academic researcher coded two sessions using the Wadsworth categories. After this researcher coded the data, the results obtained were compared and discussed until we reached consensus. In comparing the coding, our application of the metaphors was clarified and the definitions of the categories were sharpened.

We agreed to code all communications focused on goals as *compass*. In our analysis the participants function as compass when they are asking questions and summarizing conversation, focusing the discussion and helping each other explain what their goal is.

We agreed to code all communications focused on reflection as *mirror*. Participants function as mirror when they enable each other to take the time to look at, understand, and improve, their practice.

All communications focused on finding our way in the action research were coded as *map*. We agreed on different maps for parts of the research; map A, the action research; map B, the research meetings; map C, the L1 curriculum; and map D, the partnership.

We agreed to code all communications concerning focus on specific issues (zooming in) as *magnifying glass*. Participants function as magnifying glass by assisting in zooming in on what you are doing and why, and challenging preconceptions.

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Findings

In this section we demonstrate how the participants collaborated to create a communicative space. To structure the description of this complex process and let the different participants' voices be heard, we choose to order the findings as follows: for each metaphor, we address its contribution to the collaboration of the different participant groups – academic researcher, facilitator, and teacher. For each stakeholder we give an example of their contribution from the data.

Compass

The contributions of the participants to the collaboration that were focused on clarifying the goals of the research will be described by use of the compass metaphor. Our collaboration aimed at clarifying goals in education and research to make them more focused and efficient.

Academic researcher

Tamara (first author) initially opted for a role as participant observer; she would be present at the research meetings but tried to refrain from influencing the participants in their particular research. Reactions of participants indicated that a collaborative action research partnership demanded more involvement of an academic researcher than is customary in research. More involvement did not mean that the academic researcher was solely responsible for the participants' action research. Early in the project, participants were heavily reliant on the approval and support of the academic

researcher and they were sometimes disappointed and confused when Tamara refrained from shaping the action research and deciding on the goals of the research:

> I have to admit, I was disappointed after the first meeting. I had hoped and expected to leave with a clear idea of concept and context, but it turned out it remained vague and unfortunately, I also didn't get a clear assignment to work on. (Hanna)

As the project evolved, Tamara became more comfortable in the role of academic critical friend, compelled to participate and to contribute to developing knowledge by asking questions about goals but refraining from deciding for them: 'Is your goal to have students spelling without errors this year?' (Tamara). The participants found ways of sharing and discussing ideas without expecting clear-cut answers from her or other participants. The following example illustrates this:

> Tamara: It is difficult sometimes because I initiated everything. We all just have to figure out my role in all this. It's just that I have no specific answers to give you.
> Nina: I really appreciate what you do; for example, the questions in your emails about the content of my work – it puts things in perspective.

Tamara sometimes helped to focus the discussions and encourage the research groups or the individual participants to persevere with the research and form a communicative space. She felt strongly about the benefit for the participants, even though collecting data was her first concern. Contributing and sharing what she knew and thought was the only way she knew how to encourage the participants to take risks and share their ideas and thoughts. It allowed the collaboration to become a partnership that we had hoped and striven for in which we were equals who could all contribute our different expertise.

Facilitators

The three facilitators focused on structured and systematic research to help teachers reach the goals for their daily practice as quickly and efficiently as possible:

> When you just start working at a new school, you probably can't start making big changes. But you can take something small, one lesson for instance, that you aren't content with and improve this, to build confidence. (Rachel)

Rachel points to the difficulty of doing research in schools. She stimulates Naomi to formulate a manageable goal and take action to get her research underway. Facilitators tried to help the teachers reach manageable goals in their daily practice; the facilitators were very much aware of the PhD (doctoral) research. They reported struggles with the priorities of the different goals of the research and their roles in it:

> It looks like the idea of 'we will carry out what the researcher asks' is still very present in all of us – even in me, because I found myself asking Tamara: 'What was the intended product and result of this meeting for you?' (Alice)

Alice expresses her struggle with the responsibilities of the different participants. Each stakeholder had to discover the purpose of his or her presence: the action research procedure was the responsibility of the facilitators and the teachers, and the general supervision of the research was Tamara's. It took some time and lots of

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dialogue to understand and claim the space we needed to reach our own goals and also take the goals of others into account.

Teachers

Teachers were concerned about the goals of the doctoral research project, wondering whether they contributed enough. While developing stimulating materials for their classroom, teachers reported a struggle with the terms and application of concept-context-rich education:

> I have a problem in that I'm enjoying my research but then I think about concept and context and then I get totally confused! (Amy)

Amy relates in this example to the confusing multiple goals of the research. She enjoys her individual action research and sees progress but feels the pressure of developing knowledge about concept-context-rich education – a goal of the partnership as well. All participants focused on clarifying the goals of the teachers as often as possible, and eventually the teachers became aware of the importance of clarifying their goals for themselves:

> The questions in the meetings about why I did what I did, helped me think about my goals as a teacher, that was inspiring. (Bert)

Bert points to the fact that the research helped him reacquaint himself with what kind of teacher he wants to be. Even though he did not actively research his practice, the first step of thinking about his goals as a teacher was rewarding for him.

Mirror

The contributions of the participants that were focused on reflection of themselves and of others will be described by use of the mirror metaphor. Action research aims at reflecting on yourself as a teacher and researcher to help participants define their ideas and challenges. Others can aid this reflection by asking questions and exchanging ideas and experiences.

Academic researcher

Tamara did not have experience teaching L1 education in secondary schools but she could function as a mirror in the collaboration by providing the teachers with literature on concept-context-rich education and action research, expressing her perceptions of concept-context-rich education, and sharing opinions and experiences from other research groups. She challenged participants to reflect on their experiences and views: 'Tamara urged me to think about my views on spelling by sending me a field note on a discussion in another research group' (Amy). The collaboration led to reflection on her role as an academic researcher and collaborator. This concerned not only the above-mentioned shift from participant observer to academic critical friend, but also the content and responsibilities she felt towards the research: trying to balance support, space and freedom for the teachers against the need to collect data. Eventually, Tamara found that compelling participants to write reflections and respond to fictional vignettes did not limit the freedom of the teachers; they rather regarded it as

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supportive: 'The fictitious case you made us respond to challenged me to think about how I would I implement this kind of lesson in my own teaching, and especially how not to do it' (Diane).

Tamara found that sharing her ideas on concept-context-rich education did not limit the freedom of the participants, it helped them formulate and express what they thought by using her view as a starting point:

> Wilma told about a project she had developed – a literary walk through the city. She wanted Tamara to respond whether or not this was an example of concept-context rich education. Tamara listed aspects of concept-context rich education she could distinguish in this project and invited the other teachers to express their views. (Field notes, 31 October 2006)

Facilitators

Facilitators guided the teachers in reflecting on their practice. The facilitators' questions helped clarify the different aspects of the work of the teachers:

> I would now recommend inviting outsiders to take part in meetings, because they have different ways of looking at things and often don't get side-tracked by practical issues like a group of teachers often get. (Macy)

Macy points to the questions and insights facilitators bring to the collaboration. Facilitators guide teachers in why and how to be a critical friend; often this is done by giving examples of good critical friend questions and practicing these in short exercises. Facilitators need to give guidance and share their knowledge on action research, to help participants take the next step in their research. This asks for facilitator initiative, and this proved at times to be a challenge for facilitators. Tamara's presence may have complicated matters and made it more difficult for the facilitators to take up their role, clarify their responsibilities, and reflect on and understand their preferences as a facilitator. In the closing group interview, the facilitators exchanged views and perceptions of the processes:

> I was surprised to learn that it is very difficult for me to take up my role when I feel dominated by someone else. It's hard for me to claim the role of facilitator in that case. (Kate)

Here, Kate reflects on the struggle of the facilitators in negotiating the responsibilities in the research. Dialogue and conflicts as presented in the anecdote at the beginning of this article helped to make this struggle visible and enabled all of us to reflect on our responsibilities and roles.

Teachers

Teachers reported feeling stimulated and inspired by the reflections, stories and daily experiences of other participants from the same school as well as those of teachers from different schools:

> I was going through a rough time at school, the meetings and the stimulating discussions really kept me going and Diane: That's the great thing about this project: we get new ideas from each other – we don't talk about the organizational stuff we usually talk about in departmental meetings. (Nina)

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Nina and Diane both reflect on the stimulating effect of the research group meetings. Several teachers expressed the intention to continue sessions like the research group meetings in their schools after the research project ended.

In discussions about concept-context-rich education, teachers explained how they saw context and concepts and this helped others to position themselves in the discussion:

> Eve asked: 'What in your plan is the context?' Abby had to think about that and subsequently formulated several contexts: one being the daily context of the pupils, telling each other everyday stories. 'The context of myths and saga was a second one', 'or maybe it is a concept?' Eve added. (Field notes, 16 March 2006)

By asking Abby to formulate her ideas and thoughts, Eve helps her to get a focus on concept-context-rich education and this enables Eve herself to reflect on her own opinion as well.

The individual action research projects of the participants resulted in various effective ideas for practice. Several participants expressed the intention to adopt the projects and lessons of other participants in their own school, and by doing so to implement researched improvement in education for the sake of the learning process of students.

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Map

The contributions of the participants that were focused on finding our way in the research will be described by the use of the map metaphor. To learn how to do action research – researching problems, acting out plans, surveying students – was, for many participants, a new way of looking at their practice and getting a grasp of the terminology and the research steps required time and effort of all participants.

Academic researcher

By organizing workshops and guiding exercises, action researchers can be stimulated to take action research steps (map A). In our research, Tamara was the one coordinating and supervising these first meetings. Because she was supervisor of the general research project, many of the map D activities – making plans and deciding on the course of the research project – were automatically her responsibility. Furthermore, whenever the facilitators were unable to attend a research group meeting, she assumed the facilitation and guided the process (map A and map B).

In the concept-context part of the research, all participants were novices and found their way together (map C). Some participants concluded the research with a firm grasp on concept-context-rich education and some did not. Due to preparation preceding the collaborative action research project, Tamara was initially viewed as 'having the map to concept-context-rich education', but as the project progressed the participants found the content of this form of education was something they had to shape themselves. Despite this, for some participants the image of the academic researcher as the person who formulates the theory remained:

> I feel the ideas should contain characteristics of concept-context rich education, and what those are is up to the academics. (Paul)

In this example Paul expresses his opinion on the role of academic researchers in collaborative partnerships. Paul's idea might not be something that we agree with, as for us the knowledge of teachers and academic researchers is equal, albeit not the same. This aspect of the research and dissemination remains something to be discussed.

Facilitator

The facilitators were in possession of the map 'How to do action research'. They were experienced in that field but felt challenged by the fact that the participants volunteered and did not get remunerated for their attendance. The facilitators wanted to guide the teachers in finding their way in the research, to motivate them by giving examples, but struggled with how to guide and motivate them to take the action research steps:

> It was difficult for me to think of ways to motivate the teachers for the action research. In my own teaching I can give students a bad grade, but these teachers have volunteered to participate and they only have a responsibility to themselves. (Kate)

The facilitators wanted to provide the teachers with information and support, to stimulate them to undertake action research, but had to find new ways to do so in this research. Not surprisingly, the processes and development of the three groups differed. The facilitators expanded their facilitation skills. Even though they did feel supported through talks with others, they had to draw their own map in the collaborative action research partnership by talking about their difficulties:

> Rachel: This group had difficulty expressing their ambition in research, that was a first for me.
> Alice: My group had a lot of ambition.
> Rachel: When I stopped seeing it as a problem, and started seeing it as an interesting challenge, it got better.

This example points to the different ways the facilitators supported and guided the teachers. Even though they all had experience in facilitating action research, each research group required their own approach. Facilitators did experience that space to inform and guide teachers is something that is given and must be accepted. In the final interview with the facilitators Kate commented that she still was finding her way in the process of taking up her role in the presence of an academic research and had learned from the difficulty she had experienced in this process.

Teachers

None of the teachers knew how to proceed or what steps to take in action research. Through dialogue and the exchanging of ideas, this changed in the first year. After some time, the terminology became more familiar (map A):

> When I heard Wilma say that she had done an act of improvement, I remembered: that's what I'm doing, an act of improvement! (Diane)

Because of their experience, teachers had knowledge on the curriculum part of the research; in the area of concepts, domains and learning goals (map C). The facilitators and Tamara were not knowledgeable in this respect, and so the teachers provided

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information on the existing and the newly designed curricula for the other participants. Sometimes they developed curriculum with the help of their students. Macy, for instance, let her students design literature assignments themselves, and Paul let the students decide whether or not to have an application project. They designed examples of concept-context-rich education and by doing so drew a map of the curriculum innovation (map C) to improve the quality of L1 education in their schools and classrooms.

Magnifying glass

The contributions of the participants that were focused on checking the preconceptions and possible blind spots of participants will be described by use of the magnifying glass metaphor. Action research aims at clarifying the problems and ideas of participants by surveying students and together analyzing data to add to the validity of the action research claims.

Academic researcher

By asking critical questions, Tamara aimed to help teachers to focus on important issues and possible blind spots in their ideas and plans. Bert, for instance, assumed that students were not bothered by spelling mistakes made by themselves or other students. Tamara asked him how he knew this for certain and whether he thought they would mind spelling mistakes on an online dating site. Bert responded that he did not know this for certain. By asking these questions, Tamara challenged Bert and the other teachers to look at their preconceptions, and tried to urge them away from such unspecified ideas and to specify and challenge these ideas.

Other participants helped Tamara to focus on her blind spots. Her ideas of doing research and doing action research changed in the course of this study. By talking about her ideas and preconceptions – for instance, the best way to go about being a researcher is by trying not to influence the participants with my ideas as much as possible – she learned that others did not share this view and that she was allowed to adopt a different role in this partnership.

Facilitators

Facilitators asked critical questions as well to focus on specific issues and ideas of teachers. At times the courses they had taken and the research literature they had read offered them specific facilitation skills and exercises. Alice, for instance, introduced an exercise where she challenged teachers to imagine the ideal situation and solution for a certain problem and asked them to make explicit which steps they could take exactly to reach this ideal situation. By focusing on the small steps, Alice assisted the teachers in zooming in on the problem and solution without getting stuck in an overwhelming big problem.

Facilitators were challenged to check their own preconceptions of participants and partnerships:

> Every time I hear someone complain about education in general I respond with saying that I've worked closely with four amazing inspiring teachers, and that we must be grateful for teachers like that. (Alice)

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The facilitators were familiar with what was needed for action research in general, but what that meant for this partnership needed to become clear by their staying in the dialogue and critically researching their responsibilities and those of others.

Teachers

Teachers used their individual action research to examine their situation, intentions and practices. They had to get used to this way of working and feeling they were under a magnifying glass, where every step needed to be examined. Not everyone felt comfortable with this, even though the facilitators and Tamara stressed the non-judgmental nature of the questions:

> I'm experiencing the terms and terminology used as vague and when I try to mention this in the meetings I get dozens of questions about my ideas, and my own questions stay unanswered. (Sasha)

The initial interviews showed that these teachers were familiar with changing their lessons. They were critical towards their lessons and results. The interview also showed that they often made these changes on the basis of intuition. The fact that the research requested them to thoroughly explore their daily practice and actively search for blind spots for them felt redundant at first:

> After I read Eve's case-study I couldn't help but think 'this is what I do every day!' I change things that aren't working constantly. I just don't make these little steps explicit or write it down. (Macy)

In response to Macy's remark, Rachel responded:

> The difference between what Eve did in her research and what every teacher does each day is that she not just changed something but first checked her preconceptions to see whether she was focussing on the main problem. With this information she began her acts of improvement and knew they were improvements, not just random changes.

Teachers needed to be guided in what it entails to do research in your daily practice and what the advantages of this can be. They were guided to interview colleagues, do student surveys and open dialogue with students. Amy, for instance, asked students' opinions on the importance of spelling and was pleasantly surprised that students did find spelling important and relevant for their lives. These surveys and dialogues helped teachers to open up space for others in their practice to let their voices be heard. Teachers eventually reported feeling challenged and stimulated by the dialogue with their students, but this shift in their view took courage and dialogue. They reported feeling challenged and inspired because of this interaction. As a result of this they reported being stimulated to try more new things and innovate their curriculum. Even though teachers reported implemented improvements in their classroom and observing a change in their approach to curriculum improvement as a result of this, we must be very careful when implying any long-term effects of our research, since we have no data on how the teachers have proceeded after our research.

Discussion and conclusions

In the previous section we demonstrated how the participants of a collaborative action research partnership collaborated to form a communicative space in which open

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dialogue and collaborative learning became possible. We did this to answer the research questions:

(1) How do participants in a research partnership collaborate to create a communicative space?
(2) What does this tell us about challenges and possibilities in partnerships between teachers, college instructors (facilitators) and academic researchers?

Question 1: how do participants in a research partnership collaborate to create a communicative space?

The findings suggest that participants contributed to the collaboration by investing time and effort (contextual conditions) and by staying open, taking each others' opinions seriously and learning how to be critical without passing judgment (communicative conditions). In the following section we will discuss how the different participants collaborated and what this means for the forming of a communicative space.

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Academic researcher

The academic researcher (Tamara, first author) began the project as a participant observer, trying to keep her influence minimal. She soon found this not to be productive. The other participants requested answers and involvement of her. She felt that she could not ask the participants to take risks and share ideas and thoughts and not do the same herself. Because the research project was part of her PhD program, she had a lot to lose and realized that her strategy had to reflect this. She also had a lot to bring to the project. She read research articles and during the project began forming an opinion on concept-context-rich education. At the same time she was careful not to force her view on the participants and mainly let their action research experiences shape their knowledge of the subject.

It took time to define her responsibilities and those of the facilitators. The research literature did not offer any clear answers on how best to take up this role. Because Tamara coordinated and led the research meetings of all the participants and was knowledgeable on the subject of action research, it was sometimes tempting to also take the lead in the facilitation process in the three research groups. The facilitators were appointed to allow Tamara to focus on the content as a special (academic) critical friend and not be responsible for the procedural aspects. By investing in open dialogue where we could express our doubts about the shifting responsibilities and the roles, we developed knowledge on how we could give each other space but also together form and sustain a communicative space. Tamara's participation helped her to look at her role as a researcher and a collaborator. What kind of research did she want to be a part of, how does she want others to collaborate and how did she want to go about doing other research? This research helped shape our thoughts on collaborative research and research in general.

Facilitators

The facilitators contributed to the forming of a communicative space by initiating meetings and facilitating these by taking responsibility for the procedure. By asking questions about plans, ideas, reflections and goals they showed the participants what

being a critical friend entails. From the literature they knew how important it is for a facilitator not to stay in the role of critical friend but to let that role be taken up by the other participants and for themselves to focus more on their role of facilitator. How this shift would take shape in this research took time to figure out. By expressing their ideas and thoughts on the process and asking the participants what they needed from them, the facilitators contributed to the openness of the meetings. Each participant had different facilitation needs (some wanted homework and guidance, some freedom and information) and the facilitators tried to do justice to all of them by checking on several occasions where the opportunities lay. The expertise of the facilitators did not lie in secondary L1 education. This might have been a problem but the findings indicate this was an asset. Tamara's presence required the facilitators to reassess their role and responsibilities and to think about what kind of a facilitator they wanted to be and how they could add the most to the knowledge development of the participants. By collaborating we found that space is something that is interdependent, something you can take or give, and we all had to find balance in this respect.

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Teachers

Teachers contributed to the formation and sustaining of the communicative space by investing time and effort and talking about their plans and experiences in their research group, making themselves take risks and being vulnerable. Many of them started out as consumers, waiting for others to take the lead, but they very quickly started to make a shift to the roles of insider and critical friend. They talked about their lessons, students, colleagues and ideas for practice. They developed materials, tested them, opened the dialogue with students, surveyed them and analyzed the findings. Opening up and letting others look at every aspect of their plans and research took courage. Not everyone felt comfortable enough. The teachers of research group East – all part of the same school – had difficulty with letting every aspect of their action research be seen and evaluated by colleagues. This may suggest that assuming the role of critical friend for someone might be more difficult when you are colleagues working together every day. In research group South, opening up dialogue proved a challenge, resulting in two teachers leaving the collaborative action research partnership. The remaining teachers were able to receive feedback and use the responses of others. The teachers had to allow for the idea that even though they are experts on students and L1 education they do have preconceptions about them that may be challenged. They learned to research their ideas and found ways to improve their practice and create space and dialogue in their classrooms, feeling safe in that dialogue and thus feeling inspired to innovate and improve their curriculum. They developed skills and knowledge on what it is to do research and implement acquired knowledge in classrooms and schools.

The participants shifted in their roles and interactions. We all started off thinking we had a clear view of what was expected of us but realized our roles were fluid and interdependent. When one of us took space, others were affected. Our partnership consisted of three kinds of stakeholders (facilitator, teacher and academic researcher) and this complicated matters further because we found that some of our roles and responsibilities overlapped. We had to find a balance in the interplay of roles and communications. And in doing so we became aware of the communicative space we were trying to form.

Question 2: what can be learned from the challenges and possibilities in partnerships between teachers, college instructors (facilitators) and academic researchers?

We concur with Kemmis that to create a communicative space requires open dialogue about expectations and responsibilities among participants. Even though it may seem that roles of stakeholders are clear and well defined, it is in the collaboration itself that roles and responsibilities become clearer. Alice (a facilitator) noted: ‘The wheel doesn’t need to be invented every time, but it does need to be given meaning in different situations.’ We all had to find ways of contributing to the partnership, and when we did the participants came to appreciate the freedom and support the collaborative action research offered.

An important question is whether or not we succeeded in forming a communicative space. We might say that Kemmis’ (2001) description of communicative space partly emerged: issues, conflicts and problems were opened up for discussion in the meetings, but not all participants contributed. Three participants prematurely ended their collaboration. Even though the remaining participants did persevere in the research, it took a great deal of time and effort for all the participants to trust and support each other. The literature indicates that this is a well-known characteristic of collaborative action research and we probably expected too much in too little time. Action research processes often require a long-term investment (Macpherson, Arcodia, et al. 1998; Wadsworth 2001; Day and Hadfield 2004) and ongoing dialogue (Beinum 1998; Capobianco 2007); ‘the agreement to continue the conversation is what keeps the group together’ (Kemmis 2008, 131). With this in mind we recommend long-term sustained partnerships. Unfortunately, the context of our project did not permit us to sustain the partnership any longer than 18 months. Having said this, we feel satisfied with our communicative space and the learning experiences it offered. The participants reported feeling challenged and inspired by the collaboration and the partnership, and contacts between the participants continued for some time after the project had ended. The objective of this article was to describe collaboration of the collaborative action research participants in detail and describe what they have learned. One of the things the teachers were asked to do was have open communication about the lessons with their students, involve the students in their research and evaluate with them whether and how the L1 concepts were acquired when taught in context. The teachers reported this as one of the most important aspects of the project. They reported student involvement, engagement and motivation because of this collaboration. Several teachers reported a significant change in their teaching and better communication with their students because of it.

Wadsworth (2001) utilizes metaphors to describe facilitation of action research. The metaphors proved particularly suited for our study because each stakeholder could be reflected in each of the four metaphors. While working with the metaphors, we found that to discriminate between the different contributions of the stakeholders we needed to define, adjust and explain them further. This helped us to see that not only facilitators displayed actions of compass, mirror, map and magnifying glass; but so did the teachers and Tamara. The metaphors provided a useful analytical tool to describe and analyze the participants’ collaboration, and we therefore claim that they may be helpful as a framework for analyzing the contributions of different participants. We claim that the collaboration described by the metaphors shows that facilitation and collaboration are the responsibilities of every participant of the partnership

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and the metaphors can help us discern in what way a communicative space is being formed. We were inspired by Wadsworth's use of the metaphors and applied them to our research. To do so we defined the metaphors in a different manner than Wadsworth. Although this might be helpful for our study, we are aware that other researchers working with Wadsworth metaphors might prefer other definitions and approaches and we therefore suggest further research in the use of these metaphors. We urge practitioners to use these metaphors in their action research processes as a tool for reflection on the collaboration and responsibilities of the participants. With Wadsworth, we feel that these metaphors 'can help us to ensure that our inquiry efforts are well-grounded' (Wadsworth 2001, 425) and to visualize whether every participant is able to contribute to the process.

We need to add that, although we have been talking about teachers, facilitators and the academic researchers as three groups, we do, of course, realize that within these groups vast differences can be observed: some teachers completed two action research cycles and some did not act out any plans. Having said this, we contest that the collaborations did contribute to the formation and sustainment of the communicative space of three stakeholder groups. We feel that the fact that we were able and willing to talk about the differences in participation and contribution helped participants to experience their interaction as 'fostering the democratic expression of divergent views' (Kemmis 2001, 100).

The project supports McLaughlin's (2007) findings that teachers and facilitators generally highly valued the involvement of the other participants and that of academic researchers in particular. The latter may, as we tried to do in this research, act as a bridge between the collaborative research groups, and contribute to and stimulate the project. We found that by taking part we evolved in our role as researchers. We therefore concur with Anderson and Herr, who suggest that:

> academics and practitioners need to continue to find ways to work together and to see their critical reflection on these efforts as part of the new scholarship. Only through problem solving from within the messy realities of failed and successful collaboration can we move our agenda forward. (Anderson and Herr 1999, 20)

We have attempted to show that a partnership between secondary-education teachers, college instructors, and academic researchers provides challenging and complex puzzles that frequently lead to pearls of learning. Conflicts, such as that demonstrated in the opening anecdote of this paper, are puzzles that become a 'pearl' learning opportunity. We argue that successful collaboration that includes the knowledge and questions of the participants offers an open space for authentic learning through dialogue. By doing this research, we facilitate teacher development; and by doing so, we improve education not only of the teachers but, even more importantly, for their students (Sykes 1999; Elmore and Burney 1999; Flecknoe 2000).

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