Developing language educators' understanding of assessment reform discourse and practices: school-university collaborative action research as praxis

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(based on a paper-in-progress by Chan, C. & Davison, C., presented at AAAL conference 2016)

Key themes in this presentation

- Teacher education research
  - English language teacher professional development
  - A HK case study of teachers and researchers learning together in the context of assessment reform
- Sociocultural theories of learning
  - Exploring school-university collaborative action research as praxis for learning in the context of education reform:
    - How do university researchers help teachers make sense of reform discourse and practices?
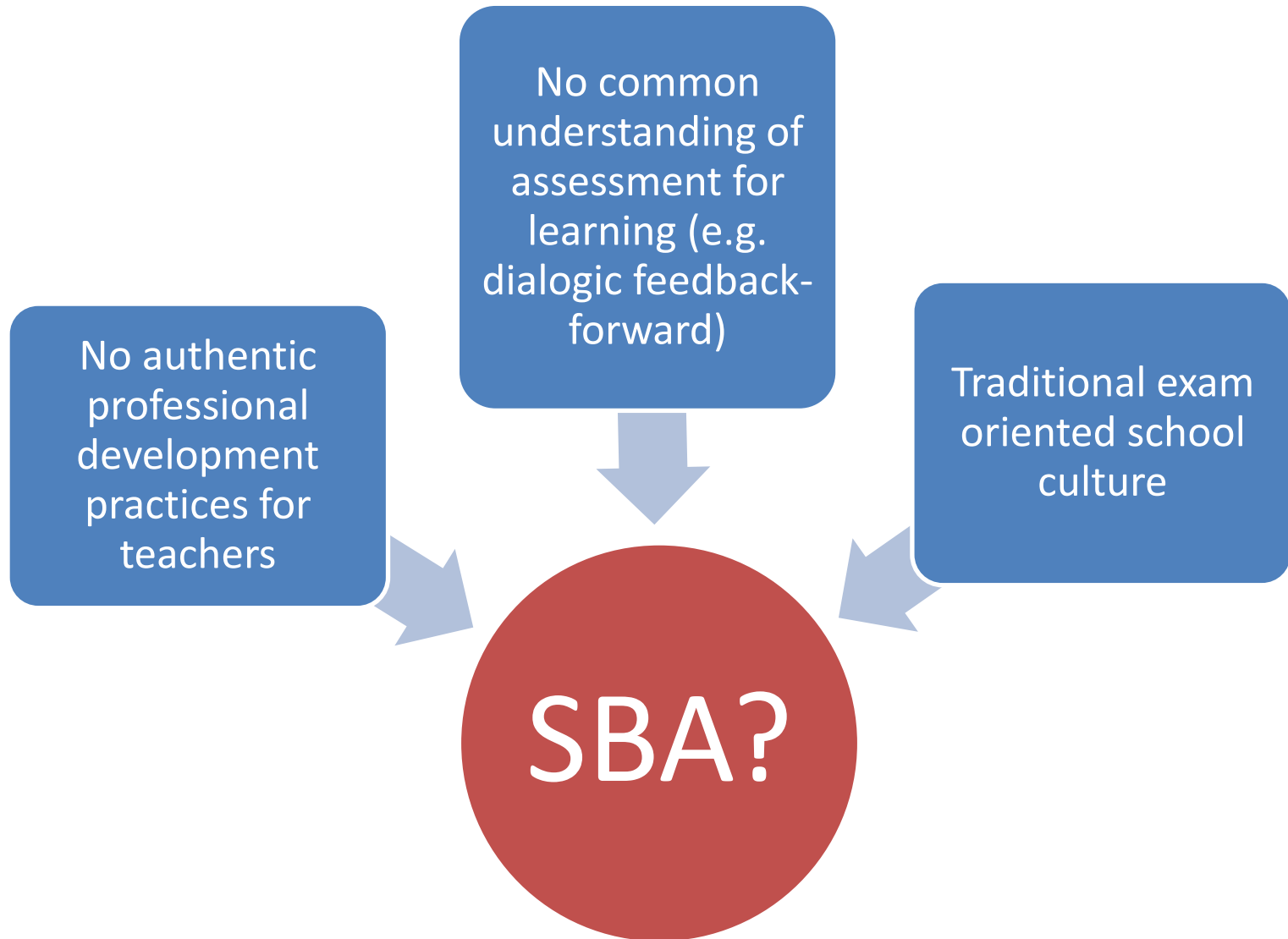   - How do teachers help researchers make sense of reform discourse and practices?

Context of the study: Assessment reform in Hong Kong

- *Hong Kong's education system has been undergoing major assessment reforms since 2000*

- *Introduction of a school-based assessment (SBA) assessment for learning component into the secondary school English language curriculum in 2005-2007, and its extension to the final three years of secondary school in 2007-2010.*

Key challenges for implementing assessment reform

No authentic professional development practices for teachers

No common understanding of assessment for learning (e.g. dialogic feedback-forward)

Traditional exam oriented school culture

SBA?

The Hong Kong collaborative action research assessment initiative

- Why?
- Teachers and researchers needed to **develop common understandings of assessment literacy**
- How?
- Through a large-scale **collaborative action research project** between researchers and teachers in Hong Kong.

The SBA CAR Project

- 24 Hong Kong secondary schools volunteered to participate in the project.
- Five key topics for schools and teachers to explore: interactive assessment, grouping, self and peer-assessment, task design and **feedback**.
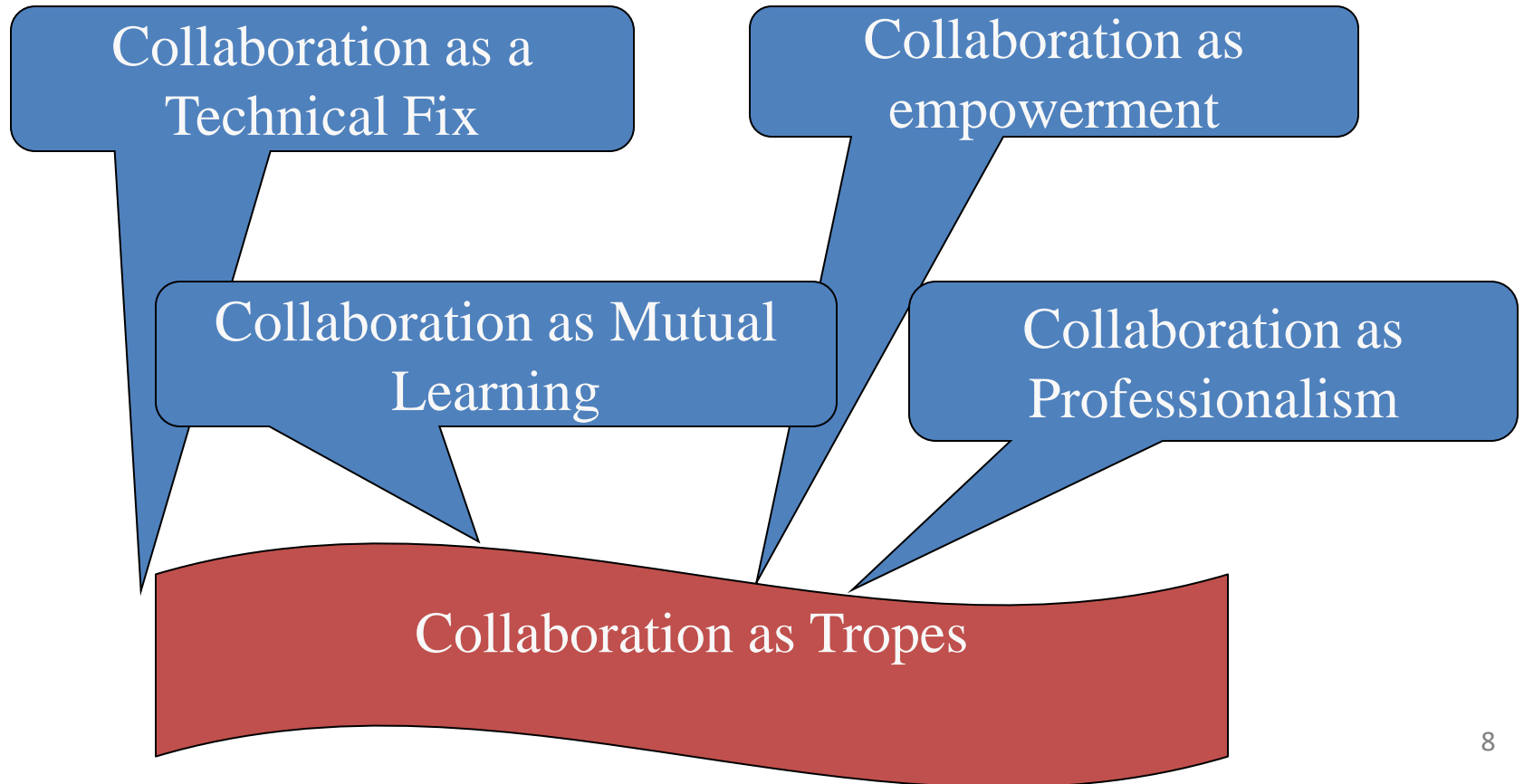
The problem of practice

A number of unknowns:

- How Hong Kong teachers (and students) perceive the assessment reform will affect the way in which feedback is provided, but in what ways? (*sociocultural* concerns)

- How teachers structure feedback episodes (and in and through what language) will have a powerful effect on students' learning, but in what ways? (*technical* concerns)

- How teachers manage to fit feedback into the curriculum will have a major effect on uptake, but in what ways? (*practical* concerns)

How collaboration is presented in teacher education discourse

- school-university collaboration presented as:
  - a <u>non-hierarchical</u> model of professional development for teachers
  - "reflects <u>social and power equity</u>" (Oja 2001, p. 6).
  - <u>Equal participation in decision making</u> and <u>power sharing</u> (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Oja and Smulyan 1989; Elliott 1991; Altrichter, Posch et al. 1993; Burns 1999; Oja 2001).

Tropes of collaboration

Collaboration as a Technical Fix

Collaboration as empowerment

Collaboration as Mutual Learning

Collaboration as Professionalism

Collaboration as Tropes

Problem with research in CAR

research not examining how teachers and researchers actually learnt together in praxis
&
Collaboration as an area of teacher research is undertheorise

(Chan, 2015; Chan & Clark, 2014; Chan 2016)

Learning from each other: School-university CAR as praxis

- The collaborative action research model drew on Vygotsky's notion of praxis (1987, 1997)
  - understanding is conceptualized as dialectical in nature, combining consciousness (knowledge and theory) with action that results in the creation of an object (Lantolf, 2008).
- An iterative process for dialogical learning was adopted in the project
  - formalized opportunities for dialogical learning about assessment interwoven with systematic opportunities to try out ideas and approaches in the classroom and share the evolving understandings, resulting in teaching ideas and strategies as well as unanticipated problems emerging as part of efforts to implement theoretical principles and then adapt them in practice.

THE CASE STUDY & FINDINGS

The case study: Feedback

- **The teacher participants** in all seven schools were invited to discuss and formulate a **two-cycle action research plan** around a particular issue or challenge they wanted to explore in relation to teacher feedback to oral tasks. (In this paper, we share **data from three schools**)

- **The two university researchers enacted the role of action researcher facilitators**

- The Feedback group's lead facilitator was Anna (pseudonym), Cheri, was a co-facilitator.

- Anna and Cheri enacted the roles of critical friends and input providers.

- 'Professional conversations' during the school-university collaboration were then recorded and transcribed for textual analysis to examine the process and outcomes of collaboration for professional learning.

- Anna and Cheri were also supported by the CAR project's core research team, e.g. the principal investigator and Katy (pseudonym), the project manager.

Data Analysis

- Drawing on a discourse analytical framework and sociocultural theory (e.g. Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 2005; Halliday, 1985)

- 'Everyday talk' collected during the collaborative activities to see how understanding of assessment practices was instantiated in the field, tenor and mode of discourse, enabling the problematization of complex relations between language use and societal practices (Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002).

Questions used to guide the analysis of the textual data

- What word choices and key terms (e.g. attitudinal words and ideational metaphors) were given prominence/suppressed/backgrounded in the texts to represent the teachers'/researchers' understanding of feedback?

- What themes emerged to represent the teachers'/researchers' understanding of feedback?

- How did this compare with the particular constructions of feedback represented in the school-university collaborative action research project?

DEVELOPING NEW ASSESSMENT CONSTRUCTS: THE CASE OF FEEDBACK

HOW THE RESEARCHERS HELPED THE TEACHERS MADE SENSE OF THE ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING PRINCIPLES AND THEORIES

HOW THE TEACHERS HELPED THE RESEARCHERS ADAPT/DEVELOP THEIR THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS

Our learning as researchers: Engagement in praxis

- It was practical and technical issues which were getting in the way of changing the teachers' thinking about feedback, not entrenched assumptions about the nature and purpose of assessment.

- Developing new models of feedback from practice up, not just theory down, allowed teachers and students to experience what the new assessment practices were actually was supposed to feel like.

- We systematically brainstormed how to address the various technical issues raised by teachers, including the structure and language of feedback, and ensured teachers were as well supported as possible by their school leadership.

Conclusions

- The results of this case study suggest that collaborative action research was originally conceptualised by the teachers as serving their respective institutional goals and practical needs.

- The data showed that the teachers were concerned that the students would underperform in the new school-based assessment component of the new senior secondary curriculum being introduced in Hong Kong at the time of the project, so they wanted to improve their ability to provide students with that feedback as a way to enhance their students' performance in the new oral assessment.

- Acquiring practical input related to the new models of assessment (how to give effective feedback) through collaborative action research was a key motivation for the teachers' participation in the project.

Conclusions

- However, this led to tensions in negotiating their identities as feedback providers in their actual classroom practice.

- Some teachers expressed uncertainties about how to provide feedback to learners because they were not sure if strategies were effective or aligned to the principles of the reform.

- So the researchers had to provide support to help teachers work out what techniques and strategies were best for their practice and make sense of the practical and technical challenges

- This then informed and shaped theory-building in ways which provided the assessment reform in Hong Kong with long-term sustainability and legitimacy.

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Q & A

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