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Facilitating agency: the change laboratory as an intervention for collaborative sustainable development in higher education

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ABSTRACT

To cope with the rapidly changing higher education climate, teachers need agency to act proactively in initiating and steering changes in practice. This paper describes an academic development activity in the form of a Change Laboratory, an intervention method based on Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, to facilitate agency among teachers. The results of the study indicate that transformative agency emerges when teachers are given the opportunity to analyse, envision, and redesign their practice collaboratively. This has implications for academic development, suggesting that activities facilitating discussion, analysis, and criticism of current practices are needed to support the development of agency.

Introduction

Higher education (HE) institutions have expanded and diversified at an unprecedented rate over the last two decades in response to a number of powerful external factors (Allais, 2014; Henkel, 2016). External pressures derive from a variety of sources: a larger and more diverse student population, increasing use of educational technologies, the marketization of higher education, and the demand for accountability (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Hornsby & Osman, 2014). Educational change and development is an integral part of HE teachers' professional lives (Vähäsantanen, 2015), necessitating the development and adaptation of teaching and learning practices in HE (Kirkwood & Price, 2006). It has been suggested that teacher agency is a key capability in the negotiation of the increasingly complex HE environment and development of academic practice (Delanty, 2008; Mathieson, 2011).

A potential problem with current academic development initiatives is that they are frequently instigated by management as a solution to a perceived problem or in response to performance targets (Ball, 2012; Murray, 2012). This risks resulting in approaches that do not promote the engagement of participants in collaborative development activities (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Voogt et al., 2015). In order to envision and implement

sustainable academic development, teachers need to play an agentic role, developing the ability to question, analyse, and shape their own practice (Haapasaari, Engeström, & Kerosuo, 2016; Sannino, Engeström, & Lemos, 2016). Understanding how agency emerges and how it can be supported is essential for sustainable academic development (Sannino, 2015a).

This study describes a formative academic development activity aimed at facilitating sustainable agency among teachers. The intervention was in the form of a Change Laboratory (CL) (Engeström, Virkkunen, Helle, Pihlaja, & Poikela, 1996; Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013), a method for supporting participants in redesigning their work practices that builds on the theoretical framework of Cultural–Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). The CL method was chosen as it has the potential to promote collaborative, transformative agency among participants, in this case members of a programme teaching-team, through a cyclical process of analysing and solving contradictions in practice (Engeström, 2001; Engeström & Sannino, 2010). The focus of the study is on the development and sustainability of agency by the teachers (Haapasaari et al., 2016), with the outcomes of the CL intervention evaluated after two years (Haapasaari & Kerosuo, 2015).

The research questions investigated are:

- How did the Change Laboratory intervention support participants to become agents of their own development process?
- Is the transformative agency of the participants sustained after completion of the initial intervention? What factors can be identified that facilitate or hinder sustainability?

Background

This study investigates whether a CL intervention can promote agency in teachers, and consequently whether it is an applicable and sustainable method of academic development in HE. Prior to the intervention the participants, who were teachers working on an online interdisciplinary programme, faced several challenges. The organisation of the programme spanned three departments across two faculties. Responsibility for quality assessment and improvements faltered due to its distributed nature. Programme meetings, a primary mechanism for discussions of quality, were poorly attended which meant development and maintenance of the programme suffered. The lack of coherency across the programme was reflected in an impoverished vision for the quality of students' learning experiences. This culminated in students' having a *dis*integrated learning experience. This 'lack of agency' impeded the development of the programme. A CL intervention was therefore adopted to support the development of collective agency among teachers on the programme and to resolve observed challenges.

The notion of teacher agency has long been a focus of international research, exploring teachers' active efforts to make choices oriented towards creating a constructive learning environment for their students and themselves (Biesta & Tedder, 2007; Edwards, 2005; Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013). In recent research into agency, different conceptualisations and characteristics have been introduced. These mainly focus on individuals and their competencies rather than considering the wider context in which development takes place (Di Napoli & Clement, 2014; Mathieson, 2011). The type of agency conceptualised within CHAT differs from the dominant individualistic perspective. It goes beyond the individual to encompass collective agency, known as transformational agency.

Transformational agency is closely akin to relational agency and is described by Edwards (2005) as 'a capacity to align one's thoughts and actions with those of others, in order to interpret problems of practice and to respond to those interpretations' (pp. 169–170). It emphasises the expansive transition from individual initiatives towards collaborative actions aimed at achieving change and can be facilitated by interventions such as the CL (Engeström, 2011).

An issue that academic development faces is whether intended changes in practice are sustained after the intervention (Stes, Clement, & Van Petegem, 2007; Stes, Coertjens, & Van Petegem, 2010). Sustainability is often lacking as development activities are carried out in isolation of day-to-day teaching practices and fail to embrace context-specific needs or local community practices (Leibowitz, Bozalek, van Schalkwyk, & Winberg, 2014; Smith, 2012). Depending on structural and sociocultural conditions, local contexts can act to enable or constrain agency (Leibowitz, van Schalkwyk, Ruiters, Farmer, & Adendorff, 2012). Hence an understanding of how contexts can support or hinder the development of agency is necessary when designing academic development (Kahn, 2009) that facilitates change (Clegg, 2005).

In the present study, participants in the CL collectively analysed existing practice and collaboratively envisioned new ways of working in context. From this perspective, sustainability is understood as a collaborative, communicative, and continuing process (Nocon, 2004). If sustainability is to be achieved opportunities for participants to communicate, express their needs, and suggest potential solutions are essential for the development and implementation of new practices (Englund, Olofsson, & Price, 2018; Haapasaari & Kerosuo, 2015; Wals & Schwarzin, 2012).

Theoretical framework: the change laboratory (CL)

CL builds on the theoretical framework of CHAT (Leont'ev, 1978) with an emphasis on the conceptions of double stimulation (Sannino, 2015b; Vygotsky, 1987) and expansive learning (Engeström, 2001). It is a formative intervention that involves successive cycles where participants critically examine existing practice identifying and formulating any tensions and contradictions within the activity. By historically analysing contradictions they are then able to search for the core source of the problem and model new ways of working (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013). This cyclical process of analysing and solving contradictions forms the basis of Engeström's (2001) theory of expansive learning (Figure 1), where contradictions are seen as a driving force of expansive learning if the participants have the opportunity to work collaboratively to model a solution (Engeström, 2011).

The principal of double stimulation is central to promoting expansive forms of agency (Engeström, 2007). Participants, in this case members of the programme teaching-team, are presented with concrete examples of recurring problems such as student evaluation results showing overlap between modules. This mirror material represents the first stimulus. The analysis and resolution of problems identified are facilitated by the introduction of conceptual tools such as a model of the activity system of the programme as a second stimulus. This model is used to make sense of the inherent contradictions that generate the problems depicted in the mirror material (Engeström, 1987). By actively and collaboratively engaging with conceptual tools the participants are able to transform the situation by constructing novel solutions to the problem (Engeström, 2011).
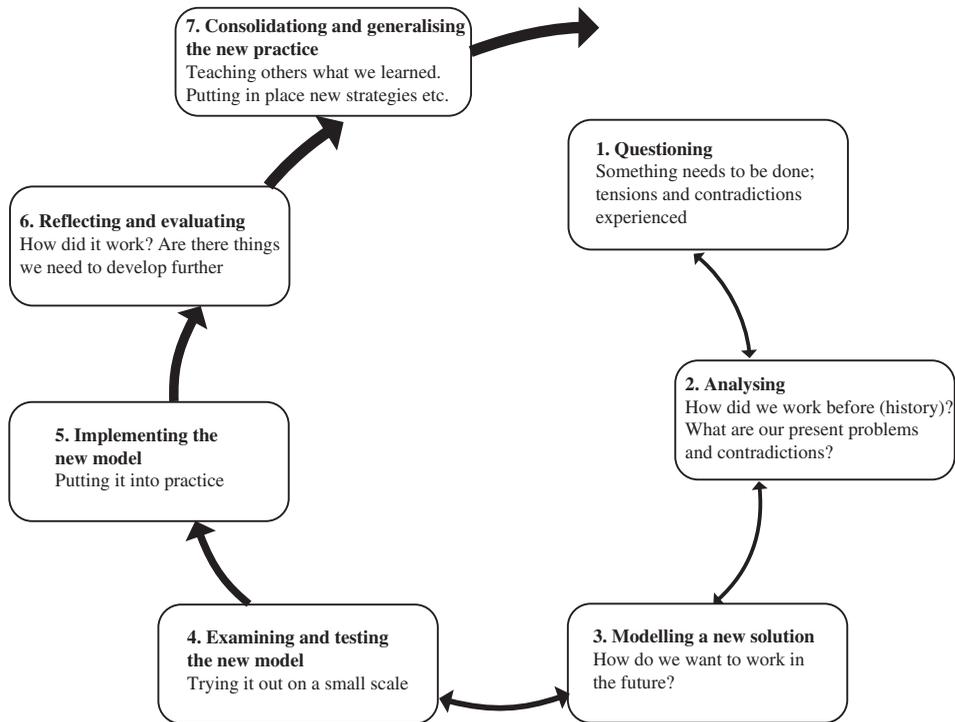
Figure 1. Expansive learning cycle (adapted from Engeström, 1987).

Transformative agency is a core quality of expansive learning and is an important outcome in formative CL interventions. Through direct engagement with the contradictions embedded in practice the agency of participants is expanded, enabling new forms of collective activity to emerge (Virkkunen, 2006). Discussions typically begin with individual initiatives and then expand towards collective efforts (Haapasaari et al., 2016). Haapasaari et al. (2016), building on Engeström's (2011) work, identified six expressions of participants' emerging agency. These include: resisting, criticising, explicating, envisioning, committing to actions, and taking actions. The different types of transformative agency evolve over time, moving from resistance to taking change actions, and from individual initiatives to collective agency.

In formative interventions the specific problem to be examined comes from the participants themselves rather than external parties such as management or academic developers (Engeström, 2011; Engeström, Sannino, & Virkkunen, 2014). However, expansive learning cycles rarely occur spontaneously and intervention is necessary to initiate and sustain the activity (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). The role of the intervening party, in this case also the researcher, is to provoke and sustain the expansive learning process which is led and owned by the participants (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). She or he is therefore directly involved in the process together with the participants and acts not only as designer of the sessions, but is also a participant in and analyst of the process (Engeström, Engeström, & Kerosuo, 2003).

Context and data collection

Over a period of one semester the researcher, who also initiated the intervention, carried out a CL intervention with a group of teachers working on an online, interdisciplinary programme at a university in northern Sweden. Responsibility for the delivery of modules on the programme is distributed between three departments A, B, and C, which belong to two different faculties. Participation in the activity was voluntary; an invitation to participate and a brief description of the activity were sent to teachers, management, and student representatives by the researcher to recruit representatives from the stakeholders in the programme. Altogether 12 participants, comprising three members of the programme board (who were also teachers on the programme), eight teachers, and one student representative took part in the Change Laboratory intervention.

Change Laboratory sessions were conducted every 14 days during lunch-break (90 min), a total of nine times, and were video-recorded using Adobe Connect®. The researcher collected data prior to the intervention consisting of examples drawn from focus group interviews with students, student module evaluations, and programme documentation. These examples were used as mirror material to provoke collaborative efforts and engagement by the CL participants. During the sessions participants discussed and jointly analysed observed tensions and contradictions in the programme, and designed new ways of working. A request to participate in follow-up interviews was sent to all participants after two years; six replied positively and were interviewed.

Data and analysis

Analysis is based on two sets of data. Data collected before (mirror material), during (video recordings), and after the CL intervention (follow-up interviews) were used to answer research question one: *How did the Change Laboratory intervention support participants to become agents of their own development process?* Analysis of follow-up interviews was used to answer research question 2: *Is the transformative agency of the participants sustained after completion of the initial intervention?* The interview data were further used to complement the analysis in question 1.

Analysis of expressions of agency

The nine video-recorded sessions were transcribed and analysed by the researcher. Technicalities and discussions of module content were not included in the detailed analysis. Speaking turns containing expressions of transformative agency were analysed in detail using a category framework to determine transformative agency in conversations among participants (Haapasaari et al., 2016). These were coded according to the six expressions of participants' emerging agency proposed by Haapasaari et al. (2016) and are presented in Table 1 together with illustrative excerpts from the data. P1–12 refer to participants in the CL. The topical contents of discussions in the CL sessions were coded deductively to enable correlation of expressions of agency with topics of discussions.

Table 1. Expressions of transformative agency.

Type of expression	Identification criteria	Example
Resisting	Resisting the change, new suggestions, or initiatives. Directed at management, co-workers, or the initiator	But can we work on something that we're not sure will happen? […] If it's not possible then there's no point in discussing
Criticising	Criticising the current activity and organisation. Change-oriented and aiming at identifying problems in current ways of working	Some of the courses completely lack a connection to the profession. Teachers need to listen to the needs of the programme, not just do what's most convenient for themselves!
Explicating	Explicating new possibilities or potentials in the activity. Relating to past positive experiences or former well-tried practices	It's a question of optimising the programme. If we find overlap between courses, we can add content within the current structure. This means we can create new specialisations!
Envisioning	Envisioning new patterns or models in the activity. Future-oriented suggestions or presentations of a new way of working	We need to create an overview of courses and how they connect, look at progression. Could looking at learning objectives be a way to do it?
Committing to actions	Committing to taking concrete, new actions to change the activity. Speech acts are tied to time and place	We took the decision to start the process at the teachers meeting in June. Based on the work of the subject group we need to be ready with the new curriculum by December
Taking actions	Reporting having taken consequential actions to change the activity in between or after the laboratory sessions	I taught the new course for the first time this spring. Now we're working on revising the others for next year

Analysis of follow-up interviews

The length of each follow-up interview was approximately 45 min. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Interview questions were semi-structured, and participants were asked to reflect on the CL process and describe any changes or developments in practice occurring after the intervention. The transcript data were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2007). Initially, segments were identified that either related to the development of agency or to the sustainability of the development. The two categories were then re-examined by working iteratively through the transcript data to identify themes relating specifically to the research questions.

Results and analysis

This section begins with an overview of the emergence of collective agency which is followed by presentation of results for the individual sessions of the CL and follow-up interviews.

The emergence of expressions of agency

Agency expressions were traced over the course of the intervention to examine the manner in which it supported the development process. Figure 2 shows the evolution and frequency of types of expressions of agency. All six types of transformative agency occurred in the data, with the number of speaking turns for each type indicated in parentheses in the text. This supports the inference that expansive learning within a CL is a process of the formation of agency. The most frequent expression of transformative agency was criticising (61) followed by envisioning of new models of activity (37) and explication of new possibilities (29). A relatively high frequency of expressions of resistance (23) was displayed. However,

participants also expressed commitment to taking actions directed at changing the activity (23) and reported that they had taken action (4).

From Figure 2 it can be seen that in the sessions the evolution of criticism is generally followed by that of the explication of new possibilities. This supports the interpretation that participants saw the intervention as an opportunity to criticise and identify problems in their practice. Subsequently, new possibilities were explicated, and new ways of working were envisioned. Some participants also displayed considerable initial resistance towards the object of the activity: the development of the programme. The following excerpt from the second session shows resistance by some participants but also how ideas expressed are embraced and further developed by other participants.

P6:   But can we work on something that we're not sure will happen? I think we should concentrate on what's possible. If it's not possible then there's no point in discussing. (Resisting)

P1:   It's always better to be one step ahead, to think what we might need in the future to attract students. It's about what visions we have for the future, what we want for the programme. (Explicating)

P6:   But it's been up for discussion before. (Resisting)

P1:   We need to think ahead. (Explicating)

P3:   We could work with more choice of courses modules in the final years. (Envisioning)

P6:   That's not easy to work with, I think we should choose something more concrete, how we can improve what we have, work with things as they are now. (Resisting)

P1:   If we think through the programme as a whole, we can see where topics overlap and can be taken away […] Create more opportunities for specialisation. (Envisioning)

In session three, criticism and explication of possibilities dropped as participants developed new ways of working with the programme. However, in the fourth session resistance and criticism of the object and the process increased as it became clear that the new way of working could not be successfully implemented.

P6:   I still don't really understand what we're doing. Now we've been at it for a while, and have compared this course module with that – but then what? At the same time we know
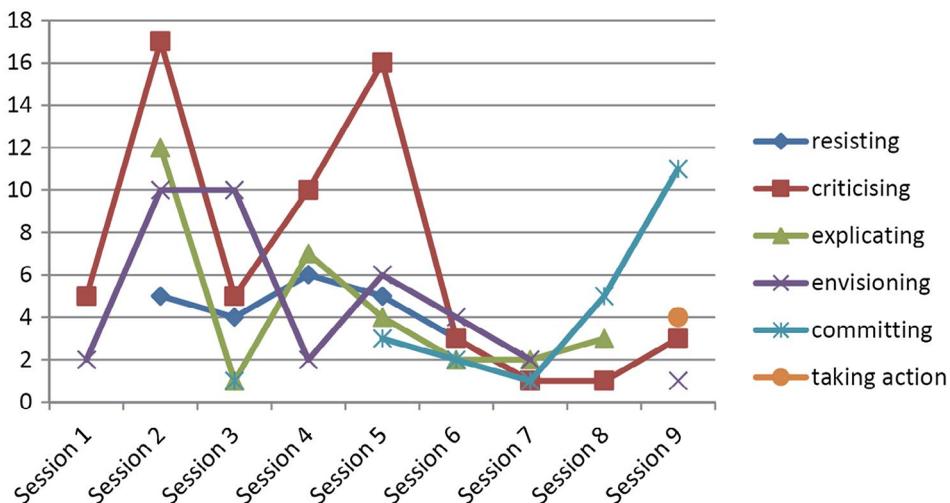

Figure 2. Evolution of types of expressions of agency over the course of the CL.

where the problems lie. Students have been complaining about some modules for years! (Resisting/criticising)

P4:   I'm just thinking, are we going about this the right way? We've just been talking, I mean, is this what we're supposed to do? (Resisting)

P1:   I think it's been going well, we've been very concrete. But maybe we're leaving the model and being too practical? (Explicating)

P5:   Feels like I've lost it. We've just done a lot of talking and discussing. (Resisting)

P6:   Maybe that's what the [CL] model is! (Explicating)

P1:   Yes, it wasn't until we'd talked through things that we were able to be more concrete about what we needed to do to improve the situation! (Explicating)

An examination of the topical contents during session four showed that expressions of criticism were directed towards the absence of participants from one of the departments, and the lack of regulations concerning responsibility for development of the programme.

P6:   Even if we develop a model to work with the modules we don't have the mandate to make them work with it. Who does? (Rules/resistance)

P1:   The different teachers belong to a department and the programme board cannot tell another department what to do, but through the board we can get a mandate to work with it since there's a problem with the programme. We can go to the head of the department and explain the problem, it would be hard for them to say no. (Rules/Envisioning)

P7:   We discussed last time that we don't know enough about their [Department B's] course modules to make the model work, since the people who work on the modules need to work with the model and they're not here. (Community/criticising)

In session five, criticism rose sharply again, this time in connection with discussions of contradictions encountered within the programme. The session's topic was the lack of programme coherence, with discussions again centering on the teaching community and division of labour, but also on the competence and working methods of the teachers themselves.

Summary

The overall picture of the evolution of agency (Figure 2) should be considered from the theoretical perspective underpinning the six types of transformative agency (Haapasaari et al., 2016). There is a development from expressions of resisting and criticising towards envisioning, committing, and taking actions. Examination of the six types of expressions individually shows that resisting evolved following the model of transformative agency developed by Haapasaari et al. (2016), with the highest frequency occurring in the first four sessions and disappearing in the final three. As could be expected in the analysis of current practice, criticising was also at its highest in the first six sessions. It dropped significantly in session seven before rising slightly in the final session as questions concerning the division of labour arose once more. The drop in criticisms in session three is an anomaly in this respect, caused by the participants' eagerness to begin work on a new model before analysis of the problem was complete. Explicating new possibilities and envisioning new ways of working evolved as expected although, as with criticising, it also dropped sharply in session three. Commitment to taking action followed the expected pattern, rising in frequency in the last four sessions, although expressions of taking action occurred only in the final session. In summary, the focus of the CL seemed to be on criticising and discussing problems rather than on modelling and implemented solutions.

The analysis illustrates how the participants' transformative agency evolved over time through discussion of problems and contradictions in the programme. This is a dialogic process, where transformative agency is developed collaboratively and in interaction between participants.

Follow-up interviews

Analysis of the follow-up interviews after two years revealed a number of factors that facilitated the development of transformative agency. All of the interviewees mentioned the opportunity to discuss and criticise practice across disciplinary borders as an important factor.

> The most important thing was that we had the chance to discuss. Above all, we began to talk outside the limits of our own course modules. We could consider the programme as a whole, talk about what needed doing and how to go about it. Create consensus.

Several interviewees also mentioned that being supported in the analysis of current problems and their historical origins was important.

> We were able to identify problems pretty easily but being forced to examine why things are as they are, to look backwards and dig down to find the reasons was valuable – but difficult!

Also highlighted was the role of the researcher, who initiated the intervention and acted as facilitator to provide structure and support in the process, regulating the meetings. Participants further commented on the temporality of the CL, which was spread over a relatively long period (five months) but with a finite number of sessions.

> I think the fact that we met regularly but under a limited period of time was important. We have programme meetings once every semester but there's never really time to develop anything. In the Change lab there was time to think between meetings, to carry the discussion further at the next session. To actually work things out.

With regard to sustainability, interviewees reported continuity in the development activities of some departments but also discontinuity and breaks in the process of development for the programme as a whole. In the face of external pressures and constraints, work on the development of the programme as a whole halted. Contradictions between the structural context of the university and the needs of the programme limited the successful implementation of new practices developed during the intervention.

> The problem is that *our* focus was to develop the programme. But there are many teachers involved from different departments with different intentions. The Change Laboratory worked really well, we were in agreement how to proceed but in the end the programme board has no mandate to demand changes. We tried to negotiate our position with institutional management but to no avail.

Although the main cycle of expansive learning halted, smaller expansive cycles carried out by subject groups from department C continued resulting in the revision of existing modules and creation of new modules.

> Yes, we've changed the programme, some parts at least. I developed a whole new module, so for me it was very, very obvious that there were changes. Changes that we've wanted to make for a long time.

Discussion

This study examined the evolution of participants' collective transformative agency in a Change Laboratory intervention. By collaboratively examining and analysing problems and contradictions within their local context, participants were able to take transformative actions to change and develop current work practices. Initially participants expressed resistance towards developing the online interdisciplinary programme, and to the CL process. As shown in Figure 2, the most frequent expression of transformative agency was criticising. Towards the end of the intervention the frequency of expressions of resistance and criticising diminished, and the frequency of envisioning and expressions of commitment to taking actions gradually increased. Through active engagement in the process, the majority of the participants were able to move through the cycle of transformative agency. They were able to identify and analyse issues to be changed and developed, create new solutions, and to some extent take concrete actions to transform practice. Participants also expressed the view that time was necessary to develop ideas, discuss, and collaboratively create consensus and agreement concerning practice, indicating that the development of transformative agency is a gradual process.

As could be seen with teacher P6, the individuals' roles in the collaborative activity can change over time. This teacher initially resisted the process but through constructive collaboration evolved into one of the most active participants, implementing new ideas into practice. This would seem to indicate that this participant's active engagement with the problem led to the development of a strong sense of individual agency that provided the impetus to overcome difficulties in the implementation of solutions (Sannino, 2010).

Although smaller cycles of development continued, such as the revision and development of new modules by P6 in department C, the larger cycle of programme development did not continue. This was due to contradictions between institutional structures, here rules and regulations, and the autonomy of the programme. This has implications for the sustainability of development processes in HE; as Leibowitz et al. (2014) have shown, the institutional context, its rules, and policies can act as barriers to the development of agency.

The use of the conceptual tools of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory in the CL, although difficult, forces participants to distance themselves from everyday practice. It provides the means to analyse problems and creates a mediating social space to engage in dialogue and discussions (Ellis, Gower, Frederick, & Childs, 2015). This enables a collective approach to solving problems in context. Both the practice of the individual and the collective community, in this case the programme, is developed. This builds a stronger culture of development and shared responsibility, of mutual trust and respect among participants (Haapasaari et al., 2016). As seen in the follow-up interviews, the CL sessions provided a neutral, interdisciplinary forum for discussion of the programme as a whole.

Implications for academic development

HE teachers need agency in order to be able to proactively initiate and steer changes in their practice in an ever-changing and developing profession (Haapasaari et al., 2016). However, academic development programmes frequently indoctrinate academic teachers with the prevailing values, ideologies, and policies governing HE (Roxå and Mårtensson (2017), allowing participants limited agency to act freely (Friberg, 2015; Kahn, 2009; Peseta,

2014). In formative interventions, the focus is on working with the participants from their perspective and with a developmental purpose, rather than seeking to deliver findings or policy for them to implement in their practice. The role of the initiator of the intervention or academic developer is significant, instigating and supporting a collaboratively-led development process (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013).

The results of this study indicate that developing transformative agency requires collaboration and communication opportunities among members of the teaching community as well as the support of an initiator or academic developer. Actions and expressions of agency emerge when participants are supported in the collaborative process of analysis, envisioning, and redesign of their practice. There is consequently an urgent need to offer academic development activities that provide support and a neutral space for discussion and criticism of current practices to facilitate the development of transformative agency.

Limitations

This study is limited by the number of participants (12) in the CL intervention, particularly as it was only possible to complete follow-up interviews with half of the cohort to establish the activity's sustainability. The extent to which the results can be generalised to other similar contexts is therefore somewhat limited. Nevertheless, the findings contribute to a growing body of evidence of the efficacy of intervention activities such as the CL. When considered collectively with the results of other CL activities carried out in Scandinavia (Engeström et al., 1996, 2003; Haapasaari et al., 2016), a degree of dependability can be claimed (Yin, 2009). The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the use of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory as an intervention to facilitate collaborative agentic academic development. This shows promise for more sustainable change to academic practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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