Chapter 3
Chapter 3
Forming a collaborative action-research partnership

This chapter 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 is needed. A collaborative action research (CAR) project in the Netherlands in which fourteen teachers, three facilitators and an academic researcher was formed into a partnership, and they together developed L1 education. Contextual and communicative conditions that helped to unravel the pearls and puzzles of CAR partnerships are described. Metaphors of facilitation - map, magnifying glass, mirror and compass - formulated by Wadsworth (2001) were used to analyze and describe the collaboration. The participants had to come to terms with their roles and responsibilities and, through dialogue and reflection, evolved and learned to contribute to the CAR partnership by sustaining dialogue and utilizing their unique expertise.

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7 This chapter has been submitted in adapted form as:
Platteel, T., Hulshof, H., Ponte, P., Van Driel, J.H., Verloop, N. Pearls and puzzles of a collaborative action research partnership.
3.1 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, December 1, 2006)

This conflict occurred in the second year of a collaborative action research project in which fourteen secondary teachers, three facilitators familiar with action research and an academic researcher (author of this thesis) came together to negotiate new views and practices in secondary L1 education. The conversation reveals the complex nature of collaborative relationships, the difficulties of conducting research with others, and the complications of partnerships in educational research. Not surprising although unexpected, conflicts like these reveal both puzzles and pearls. They help consider aspects of what transpired in eighteen months of collaboration and illustrates that, as interpretive frameworks connect, they shift and expand—particularly through conflict and contrasting perspectives (Nystrand, 1997).

This chapter reports on a collaborative action-research project and the process the various stakeholders experienced. Goldstein (2000) points out that “collaborations in which university-based researchers enter into participatory relationships with classroom teachers have become increasingly prevalent in educational action research” (p. 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; Johnson & Normann, 2004; Orland-Barak, Kemp, Ben-Or, & Levi, 2004; McLaughlin, 2007). While expected to work collaboratively to innovate education and curriculum, participants need time and opportunity to develop trust in the group. This complicates the formation of a communicative space (Habermas, 1987; Habermas, 1996; Kemmis, 2001; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) in which people feel confident enough to exchange views and “can work together to achieve mutual understanding and consensus” (Kemmis, 2001, p. 100). To form a communicative space “in which dialogue and development can flourish” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 3) many different actions are undertaken by
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participants. Because this is a complex process the objective was to determine and identify how the participants collaborated. All participants collaborated in one way or another did similar things and also did things differently. To get a view of this complicated process and the collaboration of these participants, patterns of collaboration exhibited by the participants were sketched. By describing experiences other collaborative partnerships may be aided in their research, and knowledge of the formation of communicative spaces in partnerships can be advanced, 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.

This chapter 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 are the challenges and possibilities in partnerships between teachers, college instructors (facilitators), and academic researchers?

3.2 Background

The RNAAS report, mentioned in section 1.1 of this thesis proposes two key elements for the improvement of Dutch secondary education. Concept-context rich education and the teacher as developer (RNAAS, 2003, p. 17). This chapter describes the collaborative action research process in which L1 teachers developed concept-context rich education and explored the feasibility and possibilities of this approach to L1 teaching. Fourteen teachers volunteered to participate in this project to expand their knowledge and skills as developers, teachers and (action) researchers.

3.3 Theoretical framework

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 critical friend and that it can take so time for them to develop into the role of facilitator, guiding the participants through the process (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Messner & Rauch, 1995; Ponte, 2002; McNiff & 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, p. 545; Campbell, McNamara, Furlong, Lewis, & Howson, 2007). In this thesis, it was therefore hypothesized 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 apply it immediately in that same environment (Day, 1999).

Partnerships between individual university researchers and school teachers are not new (McLaughlin, et al., 2005; McLaughlin, 2006; Campbell, et al., 2007; Day & Townsend, 2007; Boyle-Baise & McIntyre 2008), but it is apparent from the research literature that they come in very different forms (McLaughlin, et al., 2005; McLaughlin, et al., 2007). Three different approaches to such partnerships can be discerned: a) academic researchers facilitate and support teachers performing action research (Brooker, Smeal, Ehrich, Daws, Brannock, 1998; Macpherson, Aspland, et al., 1998; Mason, 2005; Day & Townsend, 2007). b) academic researcher participates in the project as a “critical friend” (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006) to sharpen the focus on the problem at hand (Brooker, et al., 1998); c) academic researchers contribute their skills to the partnership, they take part as consultants in practice (Hall, 2001). These different approaches to partnerships obliged to find the participants in this study to find their own way of shaping their roles while being part of research in, on and with practice (Doyle, 2007; Honerød & Hoveid, 2007). For this study a three-group partnership was chosen 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 of the latter would be on data collection and she would thus be participant observer. This approach would probably give opt room for diverse dialogue and interaction and thus allows for the forming of a communicative space. McLaughlin (2007) indicated that understanding of how school networks function remains underdeveloped (p. 212). Adding to this understanding was an aim of this study.

3.4 Method

Qualitative methods, more specifically, grounded theory methods as defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) were applied 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 & Strauss, 1967, p. 36) that emerged from the data and the research literature, significant themes were discerned and with these concepts in mind, examples that aligned and conflicted with ideas about the themes were searched.
3.4.1 Contextual and communicative conditions

A collaborative action-research project requires time and effort of participants to get underway and be carried forward. Two interrelated conditions can be discerned in these processes that are important for the forming 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).

3.4.2 Process of the study

The project occurred between February 2006 and July 2007 (eighteen 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 instructor) and an academic researcher (author of this thesis). The facilitators were recruited at a course on action research and facilitation of action research. While the facilitators were remunerated, teachers participated voluntarily. Table 1.1 in section 1.3 of this thesis depicts the three research groups, number of meetings, facilitators, and participants.

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, a student or a student 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); d) after these reflections they planned new steps for development for improvement and thus entered a cyclic process of exploration, development, improvement and reflection.
3.4.3 Participants

The project started with fourteen teachers (see Table 1.1), three teachers ended their participation in the course of the project. Some teachers responded to an invitation send to the web community 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. The teachers volunteered for an action-research project and 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 get a grade or a reward, was new to these facilitators. In September 2006, Ann changed employers and was replaced by Rachel, another experienced facilitator.

An academic researcher (author of this thesis), developed, initiated and participated in the research project as part of a 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.

3.4.4 Data

To guard against researcher bias various methods and data sources were combined. Table 3.1 lists participants and the data sources.
Table 3.1 - Participants and Data sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data sources</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Academic researcher</th>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Teacher</th>
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<td>Group interview</td>
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<td>- Meetings (audio tapes)</td>
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<td>Emails</td>
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<td>Plans, evaluations &amp; student surveys</td>
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<td>Field notes</td>
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By observing the actual collaboration of all the participants and including the data from the student surveys, source triangulation was ensured. To ensure method triangulation (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984; Whitmore & McKee, 2001), collaboration was compared and observed in several data sources, listed in the first vertical column of Table 3.1.

**Oral**

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, concept-context rich education and collaborative action research was discussed. A mid-project interview was conducted with the teachers about the action-research project and also a final group interview with the facilitators was held; 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**

The written data consisted of: 1) Short descriptions by teachers of their practices (research memos), plans, (final) evaluations, survey findings of teachers and emails containing ideas and questions. These documents were distributed to the participants. 2) Two fictional cases (vignettes) written by the academic researcher.
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 the academic researcher 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 with certain comments.

3.4.5 Analysis

The complexity of data analysis is particularly the case in the interaction of participants. Consequently, during data collection iteration and reiteration to develop a reliable coding system to answer the research questions, took place. 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) and one final group interview with the facilitators - to help to get an overview of the different participants and collaboration in the whole research project.

While categorizing these interactions it became clear that the facilitators and the academic researcher took a lot of time to focus on the goals of the research and on those of the individual action-research projects of the teachers. Many examples of personal reflection and of sharing views and ideas were observed. Participants wanted to really grasp the nature of the problem and have a detailed look on the research problem and the improvements made. By asking questions about the research, plans and collected data, participants tried to help each other to get a detailed and informed view of the problem and possible solution. Furthermore examples of the teachers learning to do action research could be observed. While reading, analyzing and categorizing the data, it became apparent that Wadsworth’s metaphors: compass (about goals), mirror (about reflection), magnifying glass (about focus), and map (about finding your way) (1997; 2001) visualized many of the collaborations described above that were conducted by the participants. This resulted in the following coding system: 1) the participant (pseudonyms were assigned to the teachers to ensure confidentiality); 2) contextual or communicative condition; 3) the communication of each participant; 4) metaphor.

The metaphors were appealing 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” (p. 426). The facilitator enters into an “engaged,
intersubjective process with the participants, and together hold up mirrors and
magnifying glasses to themselves and each other" (p. 431).

In an academic research group these metaphors and the applicability to the data
were discussed. It was 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 consensus was reached.
In comparing the coding, the application of the metaphors was clarified and the
definitions of the categories sharpened.

All communications focused on goals were coded as compass. In the analysis the
participants function as compass when they are asking questions and summarizing
conversation, focusing the discussion and help each other explain what their goal is.

All communications focused on reflection were coded 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. Different maps for parts of the research were agreed upon: map A)
the action research; map B) the research meetings; map C) the L1 curriculum; map D)
the partnership.

All communications concerning focus on specific issues (zooming in) were coded
as magnifying glass. Participants function as magnifying glass by assisting in zooming
in on what you are doing and why, and challenging preconceptions.

3.5 Findings
This section demonstrates how the participants collaborated to create a
communicative space. To structure the description this complex process and let the
different participants voices be heard the findings will be ordered as follows: For
each metaphor, the contribution to the collaboration of the different participant
groups is addressed - 1) Academic researcher, 2) Facilitator, and 3) Teacher 3. For
each stakeholder an example of the contribution from the data is given.

a) Compass
The contributions of the participants to the collaboration that were focused on
clarifying the goals of the research will be described by the use of the compass
metaphor. Action research aims at clarifying goals in education and research to make
it more focused and efficient.

1) Academic researcher (author of the thesis)
The academic researcher initially opted for a role as participant observer. She would
be present at the research meetings but try to refrain from influencing the
participants in their particular research. Working with other participants it was found
that a collaborative action-research partnership demanded more involvement than customary in research. Early in the project participants were heavily reliant on her approval and support and they were sometimes disappointed and confused when she refrained from shaping the action research and deciding on the goals of the research.

Hanna  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.

As the project evolved the academic researcher became more comfortable in the role as academic critical friend, compelled to participate and contribute to developing knowledge by asking questions about goals but refraining from deciding for them. Tamara: Is your goal to have students spelling without errors this year? 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.

The academic researcher sometimes helped 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. When she did this the collaboration became a partnership that she had hoped and strived for in which the participants were equals, and could all contribute different expertise.

2) 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.

Rachel  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 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.

Alice said, “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 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 the academic researcher’s. It took some time and lots of dialogue to understand and claim the space needed to reach every participants own goal and also take the goals of others in account.

3) 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. Amy: 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 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. Bert: The questions in the meetings about why I did what I did, helped me think about my goals as a teacher, and that was inspiring. Bert points to the fact that the research helped him reacquaint himself with what kind of teacher he wants to be. Even though he didn’t actively research his practice, the first step of thinking about his goals as a teacher was rewarding for him.

b) Mirror

The contributions of the participants that were focused on reflection of themselves and of others will be described by the use of the mirror metaphor. Action research aims at reflecting on you 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.
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1) Academic researcher
The academic researcher did not have experience teaching L1 education in secondary schools but could function as a mirror in the collaboration by providing the teachers with literature on the 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. Amy: Tamara urged me to think about my views on spelling by sending me a field note on a discussion in another research group. 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, she 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 supportive. Diane: the fictitious case you made us respond to challenged me to think about how I would implement this kind of lesson in my own teaching, and especially how not to do it.

The academic researcher 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.

2) Facilitators
Facilitators guided the teachers in reflecting on their practice. The facilitators’ questions helped clarify the different aspects of the work of the teachers. Macy: 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 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 this in short exercises. Facilitators need to give guidance and share their knowledge of action research; 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. The academic researcher’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 on the processes. Kate: *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.*

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

3) 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. Nina: *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 and Diane both reflect on the stimulating effect of the research-group meetings.

Several teachers expressed the intent 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 every-day stories. “The context of myths and saga was a second one”, “or maybe it is a concept?” Eve added.*

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 implement researched improvement in education for the sake of the learning process of students.
c) Map
The contributions of the participants that were focused on finding the 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 took time and effort of all participants.

1) Academic researcher
By organizing workshops and guiding exercises action researchers can be stimulated to take action-research steps (map A). In this research, the academic researcher 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&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, the academic researcher 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. Paul: I feel the ideas should contain characteristics of concept-context rich education, and what those are is up to the academics. In this example Paul expresses his opinion on the role of academic researchers in collaborative partnerships. Paul’s idea might not be something that everyone can agree with, as for knowledge of teachers and academic researcher can be viewed as equal, even though not the same. This aspect of the research and dissemination remains something to be discussed.

2) Facilitator
The facilitators 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 but struggled with how to motivate them to take the action-research steps. Kate: 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.

The facilitators wanted to provide the teachers with information and support, 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 support 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.*

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 told that she still was finding her way in the process of taking up her role in the presence of an academic researcher and had learned from the difficulty she had experienced in this process.

3) 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). Diane: *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.*

Because of their experience teachers had knowledge of the curriculum part of the research; in the area of concepts, domains and learning goals (map C). The facilitators and the academic researcher were not knowledgeable in this respect, and so the teachers provided information on the existing and the newly designed curriculum for the other participants. Sometimes they developed a part of the 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.

d) Magnifying glass

The contributions of the participants that were focused on checking the preconceptions and possible blind spots of participants will be described by the 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.

1) Academic researcher
By asking critical questions the academic researcher 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. The academic researcher 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 didn’t know this for certain. By asking these questions, Bert and the other teachers got challenged to look at their preconceptions, urged away from unspecified ideas and to specify and challenge these ideas.

Other participants helped the academic researcher 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 these ideas and preconceptions - for instance “the best way to go about being a researcher is trying not to influence the participants with your 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.

2) Facilitators
Facilitators asked critical questions as well to focus on specific issues and ideas of teachers. At times the courses they had taken and 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. Alice: 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.

The facilitators were familiar with what was needed for action research in general, but what that meant exactly for this partnership needed to become clear in time. By staying in the dialogue and critically researching their responsibilities and those of others they developed a view of the process.

3) 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 academic researcher stressed the non-judgmental nature of the questions. Sasha: *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.*

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. Macy: *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.*

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 focusing 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. As a result to 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 to this, implying any long term effects of this research might be risky, since no data on how the teachers have proceeded after this research was collected.

3.6 Discussion and conclusions

The previous section demonstrates how the participants of a collaborative action research partnership collaborated to form a communicative space in which open dialogue and collaborative learning became possible. The following research questions will be answered: 1) *How do participants in a research partnership collaborate to create a communicative space?* 2) *What are the challenges and*
possibilities in partnerships between teachers, college instructors (facilitators), and academic researchers?

**Question 1**
The findings suggest that participants contributed to the collaboration by investing time and effort (contextual conditions) and by staying open, taking each other’s opinions seriously and learning how to be critical without passing judgment (communicative conditions). In the following section will be discussed how the different participants collaborated and what this means for the forming of a communicative space.

1) Academic researcher
The academic researcher and author of this thesis, began the project as a participant observer, trying to keep my influence minimal. She soon found this not to be productive. The other participants requested answers and involvement. She felt that she could not ask the participants to take risks and share ideas and thoughts and not do the same. Because the research project was part of her PhD program, she had a lot to lose and she 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 my 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 she 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 her 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 the participants could express doubts about the shifting responsibilities and the roles, developed knowledge of how space could be give to each but also on how to form and sustain a communicative space. The participation of the academic researcher helped her to look at her role as a researcher and a collaborator. What kind of researcher did she want to be a part of, how she wants others to collaborate and how she wanted to go about doing other research? This research helped shape her thoughts on collaborative research and research in general.

2) 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, 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.

The presence of the academic researcher required the facilitators to reassess their role and responsibilities and 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 the participants found that space is something that is interdependent, something you can take or give and they all had to find balance in this respect.

3) Teachers
Teachers contributed to the forming and sustaining of the communicative space by investing time, effort and talking about their plans and experiences in their research group making themselves taking 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 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, 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 of what it is to do research and implement acquired knowledge in classrooms and schools.
The participants shifted in their roles and interactions. The participants started off thinking they had a clear view of what was expected but realized the roles were fluid and interdependent. When one person took space others were affected. The partnership consisted of three kinds of stakeholders (facilitator, teacher and academic researcher) and this complicated matters further because some of our roles and responsibilities overlapped. Balance in the interplay of roles and communications had to be found, and in doing so the participants became aware of the communicative space they were trying to form.

**Question 2**

To create a communicative space requires open dialogue about expectations and responsibilities by participants (Kemmis, 2001). Even though it seems 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.* Everyone had to find ways of contributing to the partnership and when they did, the participants came to appreciate the freedom and support the collaborative action research offered.

An important question is whether or not the formation a communicative space was reached. 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 too much in too little time was probably expected. Action-research processes often require a long-term investment (Macpherson, Arcodia, Gorman, Shepherd, Trost, 1998; Wadsworth, 2001; Day & Hadfield 2004) and ongoing dialogue (Van Beinum, 1998; Capobianco, 2007), “the agreement to continue the conversation is what keeps the group together” (Kemmis, 2008, p. 131). With this in mind long-term sustained partnerships is recommended. Unfortunately, the context of this project did not permit to sustain the partnership any longer than eighteen months. Having said this, the communicative space and the learning experiences it offered, were satisfactory. 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.

Wadsworth (2001) utilizes metaphors to describe facilitation. The metaphors proved particularly suited for this study because each stakeholder could be reflected in each of the four metaphors. To discriminate between the different contributions of the stakeholders, the metaphors needed to be defined and explained further. This helped see that not only facilitators displayed actions of compass, mirror, map and
magnifying glass; but so did the teachers and the academic researcher. The metaphors provided a useful analytical tool to describe and analyze the participants’ collaboration, and they may be helpful as a framework for analyzing the contributions of different participants. The transparency of these metaphors was increased but room for discussion and interpretation is apparent and further research should be done. Practitioners might use these metaphors in their action-research processes as a tool for reflection on the collaboration and responsibilities of the participants. These metaphors “can help us to ensure that our inquiry efforts are well-grounded” (Wadsworth, 2001, p. 425) and to visualize whether every participant is able to contribute to the process.

Talking about teachers, facilitators and the academic researchers as three groups, it is important to 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, the collaborations did contribute to the forming and sustainment of the communicative space of three stakeholder groups. The fact that the participants were able and willing to talk about the differences in participation and contribution helped them to experience their interaction as “fostering the democratic expression of divergent views” (Kemmis, 2001, p. 100).

The project supports McLaughlin’ findings (2007), 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 and stimulate the project. By taking part the academic researcher evolved in her role as researcher, and concurs with Anderson and Herr (1999) 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 & Herr 1999, p.20).

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 the one demonstrated in the opening anecdote of this chapter are puzzles that become a “pearl” learning opportunity. Successful collaboration that includes the knowledge and questions of the participants offers an open space for authentic learning through dialogue. By doing this research, teacher development can be facilitated and by doing so, improve education not only for the teachers but, even more importantly, for their students (Sykes, 1999; Elmore & Burney, 1999; Flecknoe, 2000).