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Teachers as informal learners: workplace professional learning in the United States and Lithuania

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ABSTRACT

Historically, formal directive approaches to teacher learning, based upon a developmental expert-to-learner model, have dominated policy and research, with limited success. This study is based on a learner-centered view of teachers learning from the problems of their own teaching. It demonstrates the understandings that can result from teachers' explanations of what they do and why when they encounter everyday situations that evoke their learning. Further, the microethnographic study renders these explanations as a framework for further research on teacher learning in informal school-related settings. The framework emerged from a constant-comparative analysis of the structure, language and content of a years' worth of journal entries written by 10 teachers in Lithuania and the United States in three very different primary schools: an established Russian school in Lithuania, a Lithuanian school restructured since the political change over, and a newly built school in the American Midwest. The choices of schools and teachers were made to intentionally amplify cultural and social differences, and all entries were written and analyzed in their original languages: Lithuanian, Russian and American English. Analyses of the entries were triangulated with two years worth of ethnographically collected data at the schools, including multiple interviews with teachers and administrators. Analyses revealed that in their journals all the teachers expressed their dispositions toward learning, identified their sources of learning, highlighted problems as their focus for learning, described processes in which they engaged in their attempts to solve professional dilemmas and expressed their reaction to those dilemmas. Their entries reflect what they thought was important to record and explain within these five domains: the extent to which their manner toward seeking learning was opportunistic or proactive; whether they pursued learning alone or socially; where they focused to improve—on themselves or on their teaching; the ways in which their responses to dilemmas were emotional or cognitive; and, how they engaged with their process of learning—spontaneously or more deliberately.

We represented these domains and dimensions as a conceptual framework of learner profiles. The framework represents the dominant qualities of each teacher, individually, allowing for displays of uniqueness, and comparatively to observe commonality and difference. The article concludes with suggestions for potential questions for research afforded by this framework: How teachers learn through casual interactions with students, colleagues and administrators; how informal learning relates to school culture; how personal culture influences teacher learning stances; and, how teachers make choices to assume a particular stance in a learning situation. These inquiries beg two central questions: Do teachers' informal learning profiles change, and if so what contributes to those changes? How can teachers productively and satisfyingly learn from and about their practice? Pursuing these lines of inquiry could provide the knowledge necessary to assist teachers in becoming life-long learners and achieving higher quality in their professional performance. These investigations could also be tied to inquiries into relationships between teacher learning and student achievement. Do particular teacher learning

profiles associate with particular kinds of student learning, and how are they mediated?

Keywords: socio-cultural perspective; teacher professional development; informal workplace learning; teacher learning; comparative analysis

Continuing professional learning through schools, districts and other educational entities has historically been of interest to educators and policy makers. Stakes in improving practitioner effectiveness have grown as political and economic stability are increasingly linked to improved student performances to meet the demands of the global, web-based 21st century (e.g., National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 1996). The latest educational initiatives in both lean heavily upon teachers to improve both curriculum and instruction in their classrooms. Yet, while the need to improve effective opportunities for professional development by understanding how, when and what teachers learn has been growing, innovative scholarship and research into practitioner transformation and development applicable to these initiatives has not kept up in these regions.

Until now, most research of teacher learning has been located in pre-service and in-service interventions and in studies of classroom practice. Only a few studies investigate how teachers learn in informal settings, e.g. through their interactions with school administrators, colleagues, parents, co-planning sessions, communications during lunch and coffee breaks and similar situations (e.g., Eraut, 2004; Hoelstra, Beijaard, Brekelmans, & Korthagen, 2007; Knight, 2002;), though the importance of such research has been recognized (e.g., Quicke, 1996). Our purpose in this paper is to move that research forward by describing a framework for understanding teachers' undirected learning in workplace in the United States and Lithuania. Our aim is to emphasize the presence and significance of teachers'

informal learning, as well as to offer an entry point for further conceptualization and research.

Distinguishing Between Formal and Informal Teacher Learning

We make a distinction between formal teacher learning in professional development workshops and seminars—whether collaborative or directive—and self-determined, informal teacher learning in everyday contexts. For the purposes of our argument, we group collaborative and directive modes of professional development approaches together because both are mounted and managed by leaders who present themselves as more knowledgeable about teaching than the practitioners with whom they work. More directive approaches have been argued against as less effective than collaborative learning contexts in which teachers engage in inquiry involving practical tasks relevant to their subject matter, while receiving regular feedback and follow-up (Little, 1994; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Smylie et al., 2001; National Staff Development Council, 2001). Nevertheless, top down training workshops, perhaps because they are less costly in time, resources and management outnumber locally relevant collaborative inquiry approaches (NCES, 2001).

Whether collaborative or directive, for the most part professional development models run by education experts are based upon concordant assumptions about what teachers need and would benefit from receiving (Morris, 2003). They include: Mentoring and coaching (e.g., Joyce & Showers, 2002), intensive summer institutes (e.g., Wilson, Lubienski, & Mattson, 1996), reflection on their practice (e.g., Fenstermacher, 1994), action research (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999), lesson study (e.g., Lewis & Tsuchida, 1998), communities of practice (e.g.,

Lave & Wenger, 1991; Talbert & McLaughlin, 2001) and practice-based professional development (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Whichever approach is taken, the common assumption is that teachers can and will learn most effectively through the formal direction of more knowledgeable guides. Whether they are being coached, taught or apprenticed, traditionally teachers are directed to learn about instruction and curriculum to increase the knowledge of their practice so as to produce higher student achievement.

While a comfortable common-sense approach, this historically dominant premise overrides and masks other possible assumptions about teacher learning. Leading figures in teacher education have moved away from this expert-to-learner developmental framework (Miles, 1995). Many argue for a more learner-centered view of teacher learning and the problems of teaching. Ann Lieberman (1996), for example, has pointed out how little is known and assumed about how teachers learn. She notes that teachers' definitions of the problems of practice have largely been ignored. By ignoring teachers' experiences and points of view, reform agendas and curriculums often conflict with what and how teachers believe they need to learn . Leiberman asserts that the substance of professional development models is often presented as a technical set of skills, strategies and curricular, leaving little room or guidance for teachers in how to modify, invent, or build craft knowledge suitable to their own contexts. Most models often ignore or downplay the critical importance of context within teachers' work and the centrality of teachers' decisions in developing effective practice. Likewise, strategies given to teachers for transforming practice have often not considered the importance of support mechanisms meaningful to teachers and the necessity of teacher learning over time.

Sufficient time, social and structural mechanisms for teachers to invent as well as consume new knowledge have often been absent from schools formally engaged in professional learning activities. It is widely known that these limitations of formal or "provided" professional development restrict the likelihood of teacher uptake and successful application. When teachers experience a gap between their learning needs and what they learned at a workshop or seminar, they often reject the information and keep on with their regular practices.

Limited effectiveness of directed formal professional development has spurred interest in contextualized, undirected learning that happens in the workplace (e.g., Camburn, 2010; Cochran-Smith& Lytle, 1999). Scholars interested in learning agree that informal situated learning plays "a significant part in the enhancement of professional capacity [so that] to fail to acknowledge its significance is to considerably underrate the extent to which practitioners maintain the quality of their work" (Becher, 1999, p. 205). We take the stance that insights into self-directed informal teacher learning can complement formal initiatives by enriching and extending what is known and needs to be known about directive professional learning and the conditions that support it. Research about the social, structural and policy supports can be enhanced by insights into why, how and when teachers spontaneously engage in learning to improve their practice. Further, understanding which teachers are motivated to pursue new knowledge, what they want to learn and why, and where they find what they need, can inform how teacher educators and policy makers could better support teacher learning.

Conceptualizing Teacher Learning

The investigation was predicated on a view of teacher learning as motivated, contingent, situated and unremitting. At the center of this perspective is the assumption that teachers are agentive learners who reflect upon and may actively investigate their practice. They construct their *own* theories of teaching, sometimes compatible with and sometimes outside the realm of received theories (Bell & Gilbert, 1994). This approach positions teachers as agents of learning who, we have observed in prior investigations, exercise freedom and responsibility for what, how and when to learn (author & co-author, 2005) and theorizes teacher learning as growth from the less to the more informed, effective and trustworthy (e.g., Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Knight, 2002). Teachers are regarded as knowers and learners on a developmental pathway (e.g., Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Conway, 2001; Florio-Ruane, 2000, Korthagen, 2001; Richardson & Fallona, 2001; Shulman, 1987; Zeichner, 1998).. An informal perspective calls for a closer look at how and why teachers construct their own everyday learning in response to the workplace contexts. When active choices become the focus, teacher learning can be observed as "an orchestration" of different kinds of knowledge that develop in and through interaction with others, texts and environments (Leont'ev, 1981).

Rather than a continuum from less to more or from limited to better, this lens allows teacher learning to be represented as a web of the outcomes of distinct yet interrelated, contingent choices and actions. These choices are made in response to perceived conditions and situations, and these actions reflect what teachers regard and value as knowledge as well as what they produce as new and relevant knowledge for their practice. Choices and the actions taken because of them accrue

and form a historical trail. These action trails can be described and studied as they appear in teachers' narrative descriptions in written journal records of their practice used in this exploration. Systematic aspects of written language are "keyed" to cultural contexts (Goffman, 1986; Hymes, 1972) and so can be read to observe their culturally- and socially based meanings. Social roles and relationships influence what counts as knowledge and which knowledge is constructed and applied during group discourse, or language-in-action (Bakhtin, 1981; Co-author & Green, 2007). What teachers said and wrote about their informal learning reflect interrelated individual and social choices within teachers' communities of practice.

Methods

Once a week for a year, ten teachers reflected on their learning experiences in journals we provided. Our objective in this investigation was to examine how, in their journal records and reflections about their practice, the teachers represented learning experiences that enabled their professional growth. We were interested in identifying what as learners they *did* when they found themselves in a situation that invoked their learning. Therefore, in their journal entries, we looked for segments that addressed the question: *How do teachers construct their professional informal learning?* Our goal was to produce a representation of these teachers as operative learners from their perspective. To achieve empirical soundness, we followed a systematic process of interpretation and representation that descriptively elaborated as well as eventually collapsed the data into a five-category framework.

The process of developing the categories included finding and naming patterns in the data, testing and refining these categories by revisiting the data for confirming and disconfirming evidence, and honing descriptions for the categories

(Erickson, 1985). We analyzed the teachers' reflective journals to locate places they described themselves as learners and their learning situations, paying specific attention to the entries' structural, grammatical and lexical patterns. Then, using a constant-comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), we read these descriptions for general patterns. Five descriptive themes with two sub-themes in each, reflecting extremes in qualitative properties, emerged. Before producing learner profiles for each teacher and the general framework, we contextualized the themes with all the ethnographic data from a larger study in which these teachers participated. Ten teachers' journals analyzed for this investigation were interpreted in relation to interviews with the teachers and three administrators, a survey of all the teachers in each school, and related artefacts and documents collected over a two-year period. This corpus was analyzed for a larger, more comprehensive study (Author, 2009), so it is reasonable to assume that the ethnographic understandings gained from the larger study must have, to some extent, influenced the interpretations made in this one. We see this as adding value to this project.

We chose our research participants strategically to amplify cultural and social differences. Our teacher participants came from three elementary schools: a school in Midwestern USA (Bob, Debbie, John, and Kristi), a Lithuanian school (Dalia, Sigute, Ramute, and Viktorija) and a Russian school in Lithuania (Marija and Nadia). The two schools in Lithuania with different languages of instruction served ethnically different populations and culturally different communities. The teachers in all schools were recommended by principals and agreed to participate.

Our design emphasized national cultures with contrasting political and social histories and contexts to take into account the view that learning "is culturally-bound

[and] affected by historical and social circumstances" (Rose, 2009, p. 85). The cultural differences between the American and Lithuanian schools, due to occupational struggles, socio-economic backgrounds and education policies, we considered provocative in what they might reveal about similarities and differences in teachers' efforts to learn informally. The systems of education differed in several aspects: A decentralized versus a centralized and planned system; market-driven structure of professional development and evaluation versus structures motivating teachers' professional growth; single-grade teaching versus four-year looping on the elementary level; teaching in a culture that is stable versus a culture that has undergone a radical change and is still changing (Author, 2009). In addition, the first author's linguistic fluency, cultural familiarity and experience as an educator in both Lithuania and the United States, as well as with different ethnic groups in Lithuania, made it possible to meaningfully explore and interpret complex contexts and processes of practice the teachers referenced.

Though their entries were not uniform in structure, style or language, all the teachers received the same instructions for how to keep their journals and expressed their disposition to learning, identified their sources of learning, highlighted problems as their focus for learning, described processes in which they engaged in their attempts to solve professional dilemmas and expressed their reaction to those dilemmas. These dimensions were the basis for the final descriptive framework we derived to represent informal teacher learning (Figure 1).

(Figure 1)

In this framework five domains were derived from the major themes generated from reiterative reading of the journals; ten dimensions describe the

quality of the domains and refer to two extremes that the teachers expressed within each domain; 15 stances reflect the composite of leading (important) dimensions characteristic for each teacher.

The framework evolved when, for each teacher, we determined where their informal learning profile could be plotted to reflect a descriptive range among all the teachers. This process began with a discourse analysis of the segments in their journals and interviews related to the five themes. To derive meaning of importance to the teacher and emphasis or degree of importance, we considered three features: the structural composition of an analyzed unit (manner of journal entry or interview utterance(s)), linguistic features (choice of tense, modality) and lexical features (word choice). All the segments were analyzed to produce qualitative descriptors for each of the five thematic domains. Then, we performed a quantitative (frequency) analysis of the repetition and duration of all the descriptors to represent degrees of saturation of the qualities for each teacher, and we wrote descriptive narrative profiles to illustrate their emphasis, contingency and nuance. Each teacher's combined frequency and discourse analysis allowed us to position their stance for each of the five domains according to the dimensions of each domain: (1) Disposition to learning (Opportunistic—Proactive), (2) Sources of learning (Individual—Social), (3) Problem foci for learning (Self—Teaching), (4) Processes for solving professional dilemmas (Spontaneous—Deliberate) and (5) Reaction to professional dilemmas (Emotional—Cognitive). Figure 2 represents the composition and complexity of each teacher's profile resulted from the described above analytic process.

(Figure 2)

The stances reflect the teachers' predominant, not exclusive, positions; nearly every teacher, at one time or another, referred to themselves in all of the domains, as we expect would be the case with most practicing teachers. Nevertheless, this mode of representation allowed each teacher's profile, reflected by her/his predominant stance in all five domains, to be positioned as unique. For example, John, an American teacher, more frequently displayed features of an Opportunistic, Self-involved, Emotional, Individual and Spontaneous learner; Marija, a teacher from a Russian school, more often was Proactive, Teaching-centered, Cognitive, Social and Deliberate in her learning.

Finally, patterns among the teachers' profiles in the five categories suggested they could each be collapsed into three dimensions to create a general framework for useful application. Three columns locate teachers at the extremes of predominance in each dimension and in the middle (Figure 1). That more of these teachers clustered in middle ground, rather than at the extremes, might be expected. This center position could reflect human psychological tendencies toward inconsistency in action and ideology. Or, it could also reflect teachers' selective responses to different situations and contexts.

In the following section, we provide summary descriptions of the five domains that comprise the framework. First we richly describe the domain "Teachers' Dispositions toward Learning," organized according to its three dimensions, to illustrate how we comparatively derived the categories. Due to space constraints, the remaining four domains are more summatively rendered.

Teachers' dispositions toward learning

In some situations, the teachers chose to go along with the routines and rhythms of their everyday professional lives, learning something useful as it arose. In other cases, the teachers were inclined to improve their teaching by consciously seeking learning opportunities, though without any specific objective. In both cases, they shared an *Opportunistic disposition* toward informal learning—an openness to learning and disinterest in preplanning. In contrast, those teachers who set specific goals and took certain steps to reach them were *Proactive*. They shared their teaching quandaries with other teachers and asked for advice, looked for books, searched the Internet, and signed up for seminars. Though every teacher displayed both opportunistic and proactive qualities, some clearly favoured one disposition.

Opportunistic Learners

John, Kristi, Daina and Bob, respectively, were by far the most opportunistic in their dispositional stances. Their journal entries' structures were similar and compared to other teachers', less complicated: describing a learning situation, expressing their emotional attitude toward it and concluding with a commonplace closure. For example, Kristi did not define her learning goals and look for new knowledge to meet them, but rather reacted to professional problematic situations by describing them and generalizing conclusions from the experience. One of her journal entries (02/16/2005) illustrates this stance when she professed the importance of flexibility due to sudden changes in scheduling.

> This week I have learned (again!) how important it is to be
> flexible!
> My plans have changed many times. My second grade team
> plans together. I love that. We are able to collaborate by
> sharing ideas, as well as responsibilities.

> We started the week with a snow day. I was happy to get my
> 4:30 am phone call, but that meant my plans had to change.
> Monday was to be our Valentine's Day party. It went to
> Tuesday's agenda.
> We had visitors scheduled throughout the week that had to be
> rescheduled. My team partner will not be here on Friday. Her
> sub plans had to be redone.
> Flexibility is key in this profession! (02/16/2005)

John, like Kristi, did not predict, anticipate or plan things that he would like to learn. Rather, his entries recorded what had already happened and how he felt, with an even stronger sense of being at the mercy of events beyond his control: "I am feeling overwhelmed and stressed out this week. I am finding it difficult to do my regular teaching when I have these other things needing to get done" (03/11/2005). Similar to Kristi and John, Daina attributed her choice of stories for journal entries to their strong emotional impact (the school's birthday celebration with her students, 09/17/04; Teachers' Day celebration, 10/05/04; a trip to the railway museum, 09/29/04; guest musicians at the school, 10/14/04). On rare occasions when she wrote about her teaching (10/18/04), she chose to report how time consuming preparing the lesson had been instead of reflecting on what she learned from the experience. Like Kristi and John, her new ideas emerged randomly and unexpectedly. Unlike them, she seemed to take an active stance, looking for learning experiences in different situations.

Bob took Daina's active opportunistic stance one step further. He more frequently embraced opportunities wherever he could find them to learn something about himself as a teacher, pondering his learning as well as his role and place in the classroom: "I always think of the movie *The Dead Poets' Society* [sic]. The teacher in that movie had their attention as well as their respect" (02/21/2005).

Opportunistic learners can be described as open and responsive to learning opportunities that come along. An active Opportunistic stance is one in which teachers look for and take learning opportunities that may present themselves in everyday experience, and acknowledge their value as new ideas. Whereas, passive stance teachers do not articulate specific learning goals or evolve new ideas, but instead react emotionally to problematic situations and usually confirm already held views. When unexpected ideas emerge, they are random and often troublesome.

Proactive Learners

Two teachers, Nadia and Marija who worked in a Russian school in Lithuania, demonstrated a highly Proactive disposition toward informal learning. For example, Nadia wrote:

> (1) Since I started working in this school (in 1991), I taught Music only one year at the very beginning. (2) The rest of the time, specialists taught it, though my education + Music school [diploma] allows me to teach these lessons, may be, of course not on such a high professional level.
> (3) But this year, I was put in the position (received only 11 weekly hours) of taking over the Music lessons.
> (4) For 12 years, I have not touched these lessons (except for preparing for concerts), any help from the specialist was not expected—she was upset; counting on myself was the only option. (5) Teacher A.K. helped me with literature, explained the Music Standards; I read the curriculum, some things should have been recollected, and I composed the thematic plan. (6) Of course, I would like to observe an open lesson. (09/15/2004)

Nadia frames the problem situation that spurs her learning—she hasn't looked at music lessons for 12 years and the specialist is too upset to offer any help (3-4). In a series of strategic proactive steps, Nadia lists the actions that made it possible for her to learn what she needed to teach (5). She concludes with a wish to learn more and identifies a specific way of doing it. In this entry, Nadia displays a

number of elements characteristic of a strong proactive learner's stance: she plans

to access numerous sources of knowledge so that she can learn; she articulates the

problem or objective that has initiated her desire to learn; she is strategic in

marshalling her sources of knowledge to attain her learning objective; she expresses

confidence in a direct narrative manner that reports actions leading to

accomplishment. When professional situations arose that Nadia interpreted as

requiring further teaching knowledge, she sought out what she thought she needed

to learn in places she was likely to find that knowledge.

In comparison to the other teachers in the study, Nadia and Marija's active seeking

of informal opportunities to learn so as to improve their practice is distinct in its

intensive proactivity, especially compared to Kristi and John, who stand out for their

passivity.

Opportunistic/Proactive Learners

Viktorija, Ramute, Debbie and Sigute displayed both Opportunistic and

Proactive dispositions to learning though with differing degrees and qualities of

emphasis as, for example, Viktorija's entry (03/20-24/05):

> We have visited Czech schools and learned about their
> curriculum. I liked their students' art works. There were
> different collages, made using trash (plastic bottles). I liked
> that wonderful work is being created out of simple things. That
> is not hard for the kids to do.
> Together with my class, I took part in an environmental
> protection action "I would like to live," which was dedicated to
> protect spring plants and animals. Children drew pictures,
> created poems. We discussed the work with my colleagues.
> There were interesting suggestions. Margarita became a
> winner. (03/20-24/2005)

Viktorija has not mentioned how she came to be in these learning-rich

contexts; nor has she articulated specific learning goals. Nevertheless, she identifies

sites of learning and reports on her learning outcomes—all qualities of an Opportunistic learner. Yet, as in other entries (e.g., 10/2/04, 03/01/05), she has written something that does not appear so readily or so often in opportunistic discourse: The intention or action that signals probable application. She observed, "That is not hard for the kids to do," speculating that her own students could perform the same activity without difficulty, which implies application. Then she assumed a more Proactive stance when she reported she "discussed the work with [her] colleagues" indicating purposeful application of what she had learned.

Ramute's disposition to learning had a great deal in common with Viktorija's, but she described in more specific and goal-oriented language the proactive application of her learning to make improvements in curriculum or in her students' learning. Her journal entries usually followed a simple structure: she described a situation or experience and then concluded with an explanation of what was important for her to do as a teacher. For example, she wrote about visiting Africa, where people lived without electricity and running water and where children rushed to cars for candy. After returning, she talked with her students about the values they take for granted (01/1/05). Similar to Bob, Daina and Viktorija, Ramute's opportunistic learning was active, but more recurrent. She more frequently took part in events outside the everyday, visited various places outside the ordinary, evinced more ideas for her teaching from her rich experiences, and applied those changes to her teaching. She was also more vigorously active in looking for ways of developing her own skills (enhancing computer skills, 04/8/05; joining international projects, 05/6/05; or doing her new part-time trainer's job, 05/11/05).

An even more consistent Proactive orientation to learning appeared in

Debbie's journal entries and many of her interviews. Taking on an analytic

perspective, through her narratives Debbie described situations from which she

learned something she could incorporate to improve her teaching. This persistent

analytic disposition signalled a conscious intention to closely observe, make sense of

her observations, and apply these new understandings as in:

> (1) I learned a lot today just by listening to my students' read.
> The behaviours they have are quite outstanding. (2) However,
> one area seems to be a pitfall among all my students receiving
> special reading instruction; the ability to be flexible with
> vowels at point of difficulty in the story. Each one of my
> students will try only one vowel sound and neglect to think
> about the meaning of the nonsense word. Instead of reading
> and trying another sound for the tricky part to make the story
> more meaningful, they continue to plunge through the story,
> leaving the nonsense word unfixed.
> (3) So: I have learned just through observation of my students
> a teaching strategy I have neglected to instruct. Sitting back
> and becoming a careful observer, one can learn a lot about
> oneself. (Interview 2, 2005)

Sigute produced long lists of activities and applications, making her

articulations the most Proactive in this group in terms of seeking out and reporting

on a great number and wide variety of sites from which she learned. She utilized

analysis, self-reflection and planning in full measure. She wrote about students with

problems, describing her efforts to help them (e.g., 02/09/05); She talked about

selecting a work of fiction that related to teaching she could read at home (09/28)

and about teaching with her colleagues, including strategies for keeping parents

focused on bringing students to classes on time (10/28/04); she wrote about

preparing for a field trip (11/18/04), planning for her former students to help her

(12/08/04), and about utilizing her colleague's ideas to teach fun-filled classes on the

last day before the break (12/22/04); she thought through how she would talk with her students about the tragic day of January 13, 1991 (01/13/05) and other important dates for their country (02/17/05) and anticipated which factors could be at work when she taught a lesson for observation (01/26/05). She attended an exhibition to check whether it would be interesting for her students (03/10/05). She incorporated her prior negative experiences with a parents' meeting to design the next one (04/21/05), selected ideas from communication with her colleagues (03/16/05) and her grandmother (03/23/05) to use in her teaching.

Those teachers who displayed qualities of the Opportunistic learner along with Proactive tendencies more frequently displayed an active opportunism. Such learners expressed plans for how to apply their learning and/or reported on what they had done with their new understandings. Even when they did not predefine their learning goals, they became apparent in their reflections about their learning. Those predominantly Proactive learners who were also opportunistic wrote more structurally complex and analytically dense entries, sought learning and reported on their productive outcomes in ways that demonstrated application to their teaching practices, both actual and potential while also responding spontaneously and emotionally at times.

In summary, teachers who commonly displayed an Opportunistic stance in their disposition to learning tended to be less analytically reflective and more emotional. They reacted rather than acted. Among those teachers who more frequently chose an Opportunistic stance, we distinguished two modes: Passive—go along with daily routines or any encountered situations; and, Active—be open to

learning and seek any experiences that could contribute to enriching teaching practices.

Teachers predominantly Proactive in their disposition to informal learning more aggressively and strategically constructed their learning. They consistently identified teaching dilemmas as the base from which to develop and grow professionally as integral to their practice. They either identified a larger focal area and sought various possibilities for developing in this area; or defined a specific professional dilemma and moved to resolve it. Teachers' stances in their disposition toward learning served as the driving force in their engagement in informal learning situations. Opportunistic openness to learning allowed them to submerge in a learning process spontaneously and turn many informal situations into learning experiences. Proactive rationality targeted, unpacked and directed for application what they learned.

Summary of the remaining domain dimensions

In addition to their dispositions toward informal learning opportunities, teachers' journals and interviews also reflected the sources of learning they relied upon, the learning problems they chose to learn about, their reactions to these learning problems, and their styles of engagement in their learning processes.

Sourcing Learning: Individually—Socially

The teachers differed in where and with whom they looked for sources of knowledge. Two of the teachers most frequently worked on their own as individual learners, four turned to their colleagues and other people most often, and the remaining four occupied both stances with similar frequency. As Individual learners, the teachers analyzed and reflected upon their own teaching, mainly on its

effectiveness; they also turned to books, journals or the Internet for information to help solve their dilemmas. As social learners, they discussed their practice with their colleagues, administrators and other people.

Individual learners, John and Kristi, usually learned by reflecting on their practice and analyzing it on their own, keeping an implicit dialogue with themselves or turning for solutions to printed resources and media. They placed themselves in the center of narration, constructing their narrative around their interests, concerns, experiences and questions. Individual introspection was the characteristic feature of this group. Main sources of learning for individual learners were observations, reflections, and printed and virtual texts.

As **Social learners,** Bob, Daina, Viktorija and Marija tended to share their dilemmas with someone and expected feedback, or they explicitly asked for advice on a specific issue. Though resources and means of learning were diverse, they described their learning experiences in terms of their interactions with others. Their descriptions suggest that as active participants in interactions they were both good listeners and involved talkers. On many occasions, they initiated the communicative process by expressing their positive attitude to their collocutors' practices.

Social/Individual learners, Nadia, Ramute, Sigute and Debbie, acted both individually and socially in seeking sources for learning through participation in various events and through a variety of resources. The teachers in this group utilized reflection to attempt to solve their professional dilemmas. When they derived new understandings as self-contained personal experiences, they connected what they had learned as a person or as an independent teacher to their situation or identity as

a professional educator. This led, on multiple occasions, to communicating and collaborating with their colleagues.

In sum, when engaging in the process of informal learning teachers pursued learning resources either on their own or in interaction with colleagues, students, parents and administrators. Self-reliance in finding resources and a tendency toward self-reflection upon issues of importance to the teacher characterize the most individual learners represented by American teachers, John and Kristi. Most of the teachers were social and interactive in pursuing learning sources, even when they drew more often upon individual resources. These teachers viewed the people around them as fruitful sources and engaged with them as part of their professional practice.

Focusing on a Problem: Self—Teaching

The teachers in all three schools predominantly considered two kinds of problems to prompt their learning: They were concerned about accommodating their professional commitment with other roles that they took on in their lives (self-oriented); and, they focused on their teaching dilemmas so as to become better teachers (teaching-oriented). These two foci represent two extremes of inner and outer directed attention to where they felt most challenged. Three teachers were more self-oriented in their choice of problems to pursue, while three were persistently teaching-oriented. Four, to varying degrees, reflected both orientations.

Self-oriented learners were concerned about personal rather than professional problems. John Kristi and Ramute focused on accomplishing personal goals outside of their job duties, which were not directly related to becoming better teachers. They were particular about the amount of time they spent on work and

aimed for a friendly atmosphere in their buildings so they could feel comfortable in their work environment. Often, these teachers referred to their former negative professional experiences. Quite often teaching was depicted as either a roadblock for their personal goals or a vehicle for reaching them.

In contrast, the **Teaching-oriented learners,** Nadia, Marija and Victorija, focused on their teaching dilemmas. Some originated from their immediate teaching experiences; others focused on possible changes—self initiated or visited upon them—in their future practices. Students figured prominently in all of their narratives and discussions. They wanted their teaching to be fun for their students and for themselves, and to that end, they richly described interesting ideas from seminars and other sources that they wanted to use in their practice. When they described and reflected upon their teaching dilemmas and the wide variety of new ideas and practices they had learned, their accounts of their learning were detailed and extensive.

Bob, Debbie, Sigute and Daina, **both Self-oriented and Teaching-oriented,** focused on themselves as professionals with lives outside of school as well as on their teaching challenges. Though one facet may have been emphasized more than another, these foci were rarely separated in the teachers' commentaries. Even when these teachers focused on themselves it was to gain a better understanding of their professional commitment. In these instances larger educational issues, involving societal conditions or educational policies rather than specific learning objectives, were mentioned as provocations for their learning.

To conclude, the problems that teachers framed as initiating their learning suggest that they were concerned with their ability to sustain favourable working

conditions, which would allow them to thrive as professionals with a life outside of teaching. Most often, they linked these issues to the difficulties of improving their professional performance, always with an emphasis on improving conditions for their students.

Reacting to Learning Problems and Opportunities: Emotional—Cognitive

As has already been mentioned in discussing their dispositions toward learning opportunities, teachers' reactions to learning situations took on both emotional and analytical qualities. When describing some situations, the teachers expressed anger, sadness, excitement, and anxiety, among other emotions. In other instances, they were more cognitive as they engaged in Deweyan-style reflective thinking: "a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking originates," followed by a rich description of "an act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity" (Dewey, 1933/1989, p. 121).

Four teachers, Kristi, Bob, John and Daina, were highly **Emotional** in their reflections on their professional problems, and often conveyed contrasting emotions before completing their entries with generalized conclusions or exclamations. Sometimes, in a cognitive move they reflected on their emotional states, reporting on what was going on and how they felt about the situation with little analysis.

Cognitive learners, Sigute and Marija, were specific in listing ideas and identifying ways in which these ideas could be useful in the future. Their language in their entries defined and described rational and consistent processes. They explicated extensively the ideas that appealed to them and imagined ways of using

them in their teaching. They laid out their expectations for learning and stayed focused and determined until they reached their anticipated results.

In some entries, **Emotional/Cognitive learners**, Nadia, Viktorija, Ramute and Debbie, similar to the emotional group, expressed negative emotions, which seemed to enhance their desire for changing something and figuring out how to do so. In other entries, similar to cognitive learners, they analyzed problematic situations and came up with a plan to solve their dilemmas. They used a reporting rather than a reflective style of journaling and depicted events without mentioning ways of assessing their learning.

To summarize, teachers' reactions (Cognitive and Emotional) highlight the manners in which the teachers responded to the problems they fixed upon as potential learning situations. When reacting cognitively teachers analyzed a dilemma and associated with it resources for its resolution. Emotional reactions seemed tied to inspiration and motivation to pursue change.

Engaging in the Learning Process: Spontaneous—Deliberate

In addition to attending passively or actively, defining problems for themselves or their teaching, choosing to work alone or collegially, and reacting emotionally or cognitively, once they had begun a learning process through an activity, reading, observation or conversation teachers engaged either more or less spontaneously or deliberately. In some cases, they accidentally or unintentionally acknowledged something that they could use in their practice (Spontaneous involvement). In other cases, they seemed to have in mind a detailed plan of what they wanted to learn, how they would learn it, and how they were going to implement their new understandings (Deliberate involvement).

Spontaneous learners, Bob Kristi, John and Daina, were not attuned to recognizing or assessing new ideas or information for preconceived purposes. They were not intentional in pursuing or following up on instances of learning. Learning was acknowledged as a moment of insight, as something new and useful, but without mindful consideration of a larger scheme or plan for improving their professional standing or building teaching knowledge. Their language reflected spontaneity and concern with time. They either learned from unexpected circumstances when they felt discomfort and frustration, or from teaching "in the moment" and being open for any learning experiences.

Deliberate learners, Sigute and Marija, were motivated to find out something specific in order to solve a dilemma that they currently faced. They expressed their intentions explicitly or implied them in the ways they approached their problems. They devised plans or suggested ways of using interesting ideas they learned when they talked with or observed colleagues. They expressed curiosity in what other teachers did by initiating conversations and being appreciative listeners. These teachers were strategic learners: They described a situation, identified a problem and participants, shared specific information or experiences, evaluated or implemented a new idea, and occasionally, commented on its value for development of their teaching or on results of its implementation.

Spontaneous/Deliberate learners exhibited both intentional and unintentional qualities of engagement in learning events. Along with spontaneous learners, Nadia, Viktorija, Ramute and Debbie described their learning experiences as if they had happened fortuitously, writing about what had already taken place rather than pondering an existing problem and planning how to use what they were

learning to resolve it. They tended to engage in events that did not require their full commitment and thorough preparation, and in which they were regular participants rather than initiators. However, they became more planful when they were in charge of a lesson, event or a presentation and demonstrated qualities of deliberate learners: they targeted situations they considered valuable for their learning, and they described the steps taken to produce knowledge.

Spontaneity emerged as a strong quality in eight of the ten teachers' descriptions of how they took advantage of a learning situation. On the spur-of-the-moment, as a welcome insight, they discovered something new and meaningful. More deliberate occasions of learning, tied to a preplanned, framed perspective for selective engagement and implementation for what they learned, were fewer.

Discussion

The ten teachers we investigated expressed themselves as informal learners according to five dynamically interrelated contingent domains. For the purpose of representation, we analytically teased apart these qualities according to the degrees of emphasis evident in the teachers' talk and writing about their informal learning. We represented these degrees of emphasis as stances along five dimensions, which provided a unique personal profile of these multiple stances for each teacher (Figure 2).

Each profile affirms the robustness of the framework to represent particularity as well as the variety and richness of the widely diverse group of teachers. For example, Bob's profile represents him as dominantly Opportunistic, Spontaneous and Social. He more often addressed learning situations emotionally than cognitively, while focused mostly on teaching problems. He seemed to teach in

the moment as a matter of course—alert and responsive to his students and environment, shaping curriculum as applicable while he taught. He framed problems according to what was important for his students and their needs. He valued knowledge that helped him think about and succeed in choosing teaching actions that are most successful in situ. However, he can be described as focused upon himself in that he was concerned with his abilities to learn from every day experiences and to shape them as resources for his teaching. He regarded himself as an "authentic teacher" who taught from himself regardless of trends in teacher education.

In extreme contrast to Bob is Marija, who is decidedly Proactive, Social and Deliberate. She focused strategically on teaching problems and sought ideas and information from her colleagues and external sources, which she then analytically considered before, during and after making use of them. Emotion rarely coloured Marija's continual ruminations about the nature of her problems, where to find resources, and how effectively her new teaching plans had worked. Even with extensive professional experience, she constantly searched for creative ways of improving her practice, keeping up with changes in education and working to implement them.

We did not expect to find patterns of consistency among the ten teachers' dimensional stances, and yet we did. For example, Kristi and John's learning stances consistently landed together, usually with Bob, while Marija was often aligned with Nadia, Sigute or Viktorija. This consistency alerted us that predictive hypotheses could be generated from the framework when viewing relationships across categories. For example, teachers who were more Opportunistic in their disposition

to learning also tended to be Emotional in their reactions and Spontaneous in their learning process. Similarly, those teachers who reacted more Cognitively were liable to be more Deliberate in their learning process. These patterns can inform further examinations of the learning stances of teachers who may or may not learn from their professional experiences in ways satisfyingly meaningful to them or of value to their students and colleagues.

However, we caution against any tendency to use this investigation to interpret which stances were more productive for informal learning or which teachers were more or less productive learners. Comparative value cannot be assigned to either because the teachers' acts of learning were situated. In some learning situations, one stance—Opportunistic, Social and Cognitive—seemed to enhance teacher learning; in other contexts, the reverse stance—Proactive, Individual, Emotional—appeared to produce observable learning outcomes. Only with sufficient contextualizing information can assessments be made as to appropriateness. We concur with Tiina Soini, Kristi Pyhälto and Janne Piertarinen (2010) that a sense of "autonomy, relatedness, competence, and belonging or lack of these elements […] in everyday interactions of school" (p. 737), which they refer to as pedagogical well-being, serves as a context for teacher learning in the workplace and is specific to the school culture. However, it is fair to hypothesize that in some situations, when a teacher's learning stance appears to be in dissonance with a learning context, professional learning will not occur. Future research could productively investigate the kinds of learning that emerge from relationships between certain contexts and learning stances.

We posit that the basic 15-cell informal learner framework—three dimensions for five domains—could be used to pursue questions central to assessing and improving conditions for teachers' informal learning—e.g., school infrastructures, policies, and teacher assessment. Investigations can be pursued into how teachers learn through casual interactions with students, colleagues and administrators; how informal learning relates to school culture; how personal culture influences teacher learning stances; and, how teachers make choices to assume a particular stance in a learning situation. These inquiries beg two central questions: Do teachers' informal learning profiles change, and if so what contributes to those changes? How can teachers productively and satisfyingly learn from and about their practice? Pursuing these lines of inquiry could provide the knowledge necessary to assist teachers in becoming life-long learners and achieving higher quality in their professional performance. These investigations could also be tied to inquiries into relationships between teacher learning and student achievement. Do particular teacher learning profiles associate with particular kinds of student learning, and how are they mediated?

This investigation explored only one of a number of aspects in the complex individual and social phenomenon that is teacher learning. It did not explore situations in which informal learning occurs (e.g., collegial associations, events, classroom activities), or relationships between teachers' informal learning stances and where they do their learning (e.g., classrooms, departments, schools)(author & co-author, 2010). Further research remains to be done into how teachers respond to specific education-related situations and problems, and how these responses relate to their professional growth. Also, comparing teachers' stances with their informal

learning contexts and outcomes could facilitate productive elaboration of relationships among these dimensions. A quest to understand which conditions work best with which stances to produce which outcomes for students and teachers can have practical effects such as reinvigorating flagging efforts to support and retain teaching staffs. A focus on conditions for learning might also assist in sustaining learning cultures or communities in schools in which teachers work together to continually adjust practice and curriculum to meet changing educational needs.

It should not be surprising, given the two-nation three-ethnicity design, that patterns organized by societal culture emerged when looking at the positions of the teachers in the framework. Yet, there also were provocative cases in which stances were inconsistent with nationality. We have reserved our discussion of these patterns for another article. However, one particular unexpected pattern is worth mentioning now. In the majority of cases, the American and Russian teachers tended to occupy opposite stances, while the Lithuanian teachers were more likely to occupy both. We regard this pattern as a mark of the framework's viability for generating hypotheses to be tested in further research into teacher learning within an international comparative perspective. For instance, a fruitful hypothesis to test would be whether teachers' choices of problem to solve through informal learning are rooted in national institutional cultural conditions. Distinctions in problem focus might reflect differences in teachers' perceptions of their profession and the role they as professionals play in society. Such perceptions are proving ever more important in the increasingly globalized 21st century.

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Appendix . Instructions and Contexts for Reflective Journaling

In the first meeting that took place at the schools with the participating teachers as a group in each school the first author told about the study and asked them to record their most significant learning experiences at least once a week in the provided notebooks. They were asked to focus on everyday learning that happens in their workplace that would exclude their structured and scheduled professional development events. They were directed to describe what and how they learned, and who might have been part of their learning experience. They were encouraged to continue journaling if they have been doing so.

Most of the teachers in Lithuania (in both schools) have not heard about reflective professional journals before. One teacher from a Lithuanian school, though, said that she was keeping a bullet-point record of her professional engagements. The teachers in the United States were familiar with the journal format from their professional college courses.

Interview Protocol for Teachers

Semi-structured videotaped interviews took place in schools during times when the teachers were not directly involved in teaching students (recess, "specials" taught by other teachers to their students, lunch breaks, before and after school). Each interview lasted for about 40 to 60 minutes. The teachers were introduced to the questions before the interviews. Each teacher participated in four individual interviews and two focus group interviews. The questions were not asked in the order they appear in the protocol but emerged from the free-flowing conversation.

- What is the mission and vision of your school?

- How do you envision your role in pursuing this vision?

- What do you think are the state's and the school's expectations for you as a learner?

- Please describe the system of professional development in your school.

- What do you usually do during your specials?

- What is the easiest part of your profession? The hardest? What would be your dream classroom environment?

- Please tell me about your interaction with children, parents, and colleagues. What is the most important for you in this interaction? What would be the main reasons for your interactions with children, parents, and colleagues?

- Please describe an episode when you have learned something.

- In what kind of settings do you learn better?

- What would you do when you realized that you would like to improve your performance?

- What people (without naming them) would you consider your teachers? Why?

- Please describe yourself as a learner. When and how do you learn the best?