

# BREAK THE HABIT: USING AN ACTIVE LEARNING CLASSROOM TO PROMOTE REFLECTION IN AND ON ACTION AT THE WORKPLACE

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## Abstract

Routine and projects had dominated work models for preschool staff in a Swedish municipality, creating experiences of professional fragmentation between preschools. To break such patterns, a process approach was initiated promoting continuous competence development. Cultural Historical Activity Theory was used for designing an activity with the aim to collectively move from the abstract to the concrete, articulating experiences of lessons learnt during the process approach with a writing seminar in an active learning classroom. The study concluded that reflective practice should be materialized in concrete activities and that writing seminars, in active learning classrooms, is a suggested model for such activities triggering expansive learning.

## Introduction

Routine and projects had dominated work models for preschool staff in a Swedish municipality. When investigating effects of these ways of working with competence and organizational development among preschools in the municipality, it was shown that there were unwanted inequalities among the preschools regarding how young children were supported in processes of language development, the use of digital tools, and the type of pedagogical practices for young children. To break such patterns, a process approach was initiated promoting continuous competence development captured in the phrase 'Get to know your own device'. To become focused, yet open, there was a link to digital tools in the process initiative due to a shift in the curriculum for preschool identifying adequate digital competence in preschool settings. Organizing practices in the initiative focused on combining language development among the young children with relevant use of digital tools, developing pedagogical models for the inclusion of young children while using digital tools, and, furthermore, developing leadership models to enable the staff to integrate and maintain the process approach in everyday practice.

After two years of continuous effort, the common experience was positive, but when trying to present the experience for stakeholders outside of the organization,

such as responsible school politicians, there was a frustration linked to the lack of language for the positive experience of professional development and enhanced organizational quality. Therefore, there was a need to develop such a language to be able to present and share the experience to a wider community. This paper focuses on the writing seminar and the participants' experiences of such an activity, by asking the following research question:

*RQ: How was the writing seminar experience for its participants regarding how to communicate lessons learnt in the process driven development initiative?*

## Cultural Historical Activity Theory and Expansive Learning

From a Cultural Historical Activity theoretical point of view, it is a necessity to be able to be concrete in relation to what has been experienced and achieved to capture the potential of learning and change (Engeström, 2001). Learning is often regarded as vertical processes, i.e. moving people up the ladder of increased competence. However, most intriguing kinds of learning in work organizations violate the presupposition that people already know what should be learnt as well as how it should be learnt. People in organizations are often experiencing change, irregularities, and unpredicted events. Therefore, to address these types of difficulties, expansive learning (as a 'sideways' learning process) was suggested to capture the learning of what is "not yet there" (Engeström, 2001, p. 138).

Moving towards expansive learning is fueled by contradictions, since internal contradictions are the driving force of change and development in activity systems that have been developed over time (Engeström, 2001). When change is wanted but how it should happen is unknown, expansive learning is suggested as it is seen as a theoretical model that learning happens during the search process.

Central to expansive learning is to provide possibilities for meaning making and negotiation among the participants in the process, since expansive learning is defined as a collective process rather than an individual one (Engeström & Sannino, 2010), in which participatory analysis becomes key to supporting expansive learning (Sannino et al., 2016).

Furthermore, important for the expansive learning process is the concept formation processes. Such processes happen when the learners are engaged into the practice of formulating tensions and contradictions to use them as a trigger for creativity in relation to form models and concepts that might be helpful to create change at the workplace to address issues at hand (Engeström, 2020). The capacity to formulate models and concepts are not at all trivial since they might have the capacity to also support agency among the involved participants that, furthermore, can create

change at the workplace when dealing with challenging affairs in this process of concept formations (Engeström et al., 2020).

These processes have shown to be empowering in a range of situations such as creating change in libraries (Engeström et al., 2013) or address tensions for change in cultural settings (Botha, 2012) as well as sustainability initiatives in higher education institutions (Scahill & Bligh, 2022). Therefore, expansive learning was considered suitable in this study once collective learning and articulation of learning at the workplace of preschools was at the core.

## Active Learning Classroom: What Is Its Use?

To capture the experienced in the ‘Get to know your own device’ development process, a writing seminar in an active learning classroom (ALC) was created to collectively produce texts for concrete descriptions and specified explanations of the positive learning experience in the collective. This design of the activity was built upon previous research showing that interactive pedagogy in ALC increases students’ equal participation and reduces positional discrimination found in traditional classrooms (Park & Choi, 2014) as well as provides a supportive structure for instructors to enhance students’ engagement (Johnson et al., 2021; Mui et al., 2019). Furthermore, self-reports of student engagement have shown an increase in ALCs (Holec & Marynowski, 2020; Gordy et al., 2019; Donkin & Kynn, 2021; Farrow & Wetzel, 2021) as well as increased engagement in course content (Chacón-Díaz, 2020). Moreover, ALC has shown to support students’ creativity and innovation better than traditional rooms (Chiu & Cheng, 2017) as well as students’ satisfaction on their learning (Hyun et al., 2017).

However, suggestions regarding the role of the ALC to generate engagement and participation have also raised questions about whether it is the ACL itself that increases engagement or if engagement and learning have more to do with the interactive pedagogical practices in such rooms (Metzger & Langley, 2020; Hao et al., 2021). Despite the difficulties to clearly separate what the main explaining factor for identified increased experiences is, previous research generally emphasizes the need to create dynamic actions during the time in an ALC to benefit from the material capacities of the room. However, most of the previous research on ALC has been conducted in the context of higher education with special focus on students’ learning. Therefore, it is a need to add studies done in different contexts and other groups of learners, which the current study undertakes.

## The Active Learning Classroom in the Study

The writing seminar for the preschool professionals was conducted at the regional university in a room of approximately 90 square meters. The room contained seven

tables and seven screens attached to the wall close to each table. The round tables arranged in a circle in the room had the capacity for seven chairs. It was also possible to write on the walls due to a specific type of wallpaper. Each table could project laptop screens on the bigger screen on the walls. Furthermore, the screen could also be shared so that each table-connected screen could have the same projected content where participants were seated.

## Method

This paper draws upon an interpretative approach capturing experiences among the participants in the writing seminar in the ALC room. Video-recording of the full seminar was used as the main data material for the analysis, in combination with interviews with participants as well as a survey with open ended questions focusing on the experiences after the seminar was finished. The interpretative approach was inspired by content analysis by Braun and Clark (2006) often used in CHAT driven interpretative work (Chang, 2021; Spante et al., 2022) with a particular interest towards signs of professional development during the writing seminar such as expressions of experienced development, relevance of the writing process, and unexpected learning.

The organization of the writing seminar in the ALC room was linked to professional groups that the participants normally worked in in the municipality. There were 20 participants with different roles in five groups as follows: 1) five principals from different preschools; 2) five preschool teachers having the roles of digitalization developers; 3) three preschool teachers who belonged to the pedagogical development; 4) five preschool teachers focusing on language development; and 5) the municipal preschool manager and the process leader of the overall initiative.

The task each group had was to collectively write an abstract of 250-300 words with aim, method, and result to capture the lessons learnt from the overall competence development process conducted in the municipality. In total, five abstracts should be written during the day. The abstracts were sent to a local conference related to work integrated learning at the regional university. The participants were expected to present their abstracts at the conference.

After the writing seminar in the ALC, respondents did reflect upon descriptions of the day, its relevance for the continuation of the work process, and in what way the writing seminar created an understanding of their common idea of an equal preschool in the municipality and further reflections. Words such as ‘inspirational’, ‘developing’, and ‘educational’ were emphasized but also words like ‘challenging’, ‘nervously’, and ‘tumultuous’ in the open-ended survey.

## Result and Discussion

All participants found the writing seminar relevant for the professional development. They experienced it as beneficial for making the lessons learnt concrete and, furthermore, how they learnt more when writing together in such an interactive way with the recourses of an ALC. These experiences share similarities with previous research of self-reported increased engagement for students in higher education (Holec & Marynowski, 2020; Gordy et al., 2019; Donkin & Kynn, 2021; Farrow & Wetzel, 2021). This study shows similar experiences for professionals in preschools.

The result of the writing seminar suggests that the ALC room in combination with the interaction within and between participating groups activated what Engeström (2001) refers to as *Expansive learning*. This can be noticed when the participants *moved* from the abstract notion of success to the concrete articulation of performed activities, manifesting the experience of success at their workplace with their colleagues when writing together. Furthermore, the ALC with several large screens and walls to write on was seen as an essential tool supporting the expansive learning in the preschool context when conceptualizing learning in the “Get to know your own device” process.

During the seminar it was observed that the writing groups elaborated discussions of what they have achieved in the process and how they should articulate these achievements. They continuously expressed the experience that they had and the impressions of success, but it was hard for them to present it when discussing in groups in the ALC room. They struggled to find words and it was quite frustrating mainly at the beginning of the writing seminar. The initial task to formulate the aim of their activity in the ‘Get to know your own device’ was experienced as particularly challenging since they had a hard time to distinguish that specific aim thinking about their general professional description. During the seminar, they all said it was hard since actions tend to become interwoven into everyday practices and experienced as quite mundane. However, many of them claimed that it was not something really special that they had done. When asked why they then experienced the process initiative as successful, they all became motivated to find words to describe what they had achieved in their groups.

Despite the hardship, all groups were able to formulate a specific aim, describe what they had done to achieve the aim, and the result. All groups did write their abstract that day.

When asked about the experience of being part of the writing seminar, participants expressed a positive feeling, as we can notice in the following excerpts from the

open-ended survey. The excerpts have been translated from Swedish to English by the author:

It was good to be given time to reflect upon what and how we are working. Then it became clearer to see the actual development of our work, so it does lead to improvements [respondent 7]

It was good to get it down on paper and articulate what we have done [respondent 8]

Comments like the ones presented above lead to the interpretation that the actual practice of articulation, group discussion, and collective formulation in writing was beneficial to capture what they had done and, furthermore, what they had learnt. Such participatory analysis has previously shown to be central for expansive learning (Sannino et al., 2016).

Most of the respondents identified that not only the group work but also listening to the others during the activity and taking an active part in their collective writing effort during the writing seminar in the ALC were beneficial for their collective learning. They particularly liked the way walls were used to write on, and how shared screens were used to project the ongoing text, as both of the resources helped them to be critical and seek clarification.

It was important to get all involved and also to understand that we are a collective that develops together [respondent 6]

We are on the same path towards a more mutual mindset and a common understanding that we really felt during this day in the room [respondent 10]

The study concludes that reflective practice should be materialized in concrete activities, and writing seminars in active learning classrooms is suggested as a model for such activities. It is argued that this process clearly shows signs of expansive learning, where the collective, the interactions, and the material use helped the participants to voice their learning, to not settle with the internal sensation of relevance but also articulate it to be able to communicate their learnings to others.

Words such as ‘hopeful’, ‘pride’ and ‘empowering’ coming from the participants were also interpreted as signs of expansive learning since they initially downplayed what they had done and referred their effort to everyday practice. However, when reflecting upon it and being pushed to articulate it, they could capture their

contributions to the preschool organizations in a much clearer way and with joyful insights.

This study suggests that the ALC situations could help the participants to come together as a collective, formulating their lessons learnt. Moreover, they could also present to each other and find further collective relevance in the diverse efforts, yet linked with a common goal of improving all preschools for all children in the municipality.

An interesting effect was also linked to the experience of equal contribution despite the various hierarchical roles present in the ALC. During the day of the writing seminar, they paid little attention towards what roles were present in the different groups when presenting the progression of the texts, whether it was the group of principals or preschool teachers, or the municipal preschool manager and the process leader. The participants said they had a sensation of equal participation during the writing seminar and this note was also expressed by one of the participants:

That more professional groups participate with their interest, experience and engagement but also to become challenged further in each professional role leading towards collective learning [respondent 9].

This experience is related to the identified positional discrimination found in traditional classrooms but less so in ALC (Park & Choi, 2014); in this study this note is generalized towards the hierarchical position in organizations such as preschools. During the writing seminar, it was as if the normal roles became backgrounded and the focus on the collective articulation to grasp the content of experienced success was foregrounded. This observation requires further investigations into research and the organization of writing seminars in ALC.

In this study, the intense interaction with the task and with the group members, but also across groups when presenting text progression during the day, became a necessary dynamic for the experienced relevance of the writing seminar. It is suggested that the ALC helped reduce the role of hierarchical position, but again, if the ALC is the main explanatory factor or if it is rather the organization of the interactive sessions remains unclear, as some previous research has demonstrated (Hao et al., 2021).

However, despite this remark it is suggested that in this study the ALC did provide a material situation that supported the engagement and the interactivity among the groups to achieve the articulation of the lessons learnt after the two-year project, where they were able to identify their what and how and results. Furthermore, the sideways learning empathized in expansive learning (Engeström, 2001) was seen

as emerging and developing in this study, since the groups could connect their learning, initially identified as separated and isolated actions, and therefore, experienced it as more beneficial for the whole preschool organization in the municipality. This note also suggests that there is a need to create circumstances for professional collectives to meet and interact to promote expansive learning processes that might otherwise become forgotten or blurred due to the everyday pace and hassles. Moreover, with material support of an ALC situated in an interactive process, expansive learning is not only suitable for students but also for professionals.

The strongest experience among the participants was the notion of togetherness. During the day, it became evident that the experience of success was not only linked to the individual groups' achievements during the process initiative. They also affirmed that the experienced success became even more accentuated when they also connected the learning into a more coherent and systemic approach of what had been created and dynamically pushed forward. The linkage between groups became clarified and articulated. When writing together in the ALC and collectively putting word on their lessons learnt, such concept formation process further fueled their collective experience of empowerment by togetherness as previously discussed by Engeström (2020).

## Conclusion

The interpretation of the writing seminars during the day emphasizes the necessity for organizations to provide possibilities to create space for practices such as collective reflection, to not only move on to other tasks but to get the opportunity to capture what has been achieved. Otherwise, there is a risk that the actual learning becomes backgrounded and the contribution by factual actions ignored. This study suggests that breaking the historically developed habit to start projects and move from one project to another is something to rethink since it might create a fragmented rather than united effort of development and, therefore, increase the sensations of loss of meaningfulness as experienced in the municipality before the process initiative.

Despite the fact that a one day writing seminar might seem like a time-consuming activity, this study shows that it might be possible to have an even wider impact than initially believed when bringing different roles together into a mutual task. The most empowering part was to trigger the possibility for expansive learning by concept formation, here captured by the form of writing an abstract together in an ALC. This material practice emphasized going from the abstract notion of success to a concrete fueled collective capacity and sparked further energy in the collective. In this case, expansive learning was promoted in preschools, among the professionals in a Swedish municipality, for the benefit of all children and their



everyday experiences at their preschool when developing their language and having fun at the preschool.

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