

# Language Across the Curriculum: Building a Learning Community

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**Abstract**—This paper reports on an ongoing action research project with the aim of exploring the development of a learning community around Language Across the Curriculum (LAC) in a context where the school language (Swedish) is surrounded and much influenced by the national majority language (Finnish). One year into the project, two sets of follow-up interviews have been conducted with five of the teachers and undergone an inductive qualitative content analysis to explore the process. The findings suggest that the increased mastering of didactics for LAC added to a shared awareness of the situation form a fruitful footing for taking necessary action in more concrete terms. For this process, the support of school leadership is seen as crucial. Also, the didactic competence building has provided the teachers with more shared professionally oriented language as activities are planned and discussed. The main challenge is for teachers to find the time to work together. The learning process for individual teachers shows much variation; however, the group activities and other collegial efforts asked for and supported by the school leadership form a necessary gear to drive the larger process on. Overall conclusions thus far into the project are that collaborative action research principles can work as a structure and drive for a continuous learning process around LAC. In the continuing process during this project, however, specific aspects need further focus and facilitation. This particularly concerns enough opportunities for efficient planning of LAC activities, added support for teachers for subjects where reading and writing is scarce, and the sensitive issue of offering colleagues with constructive critique during shadowing activities to improve educational practices further.

**Index Terms**—Learning Community, Language Across the Curriculum, Action Research, Continuous Professional Development

## I. INTRODUCTION

In Finland, Finnish and Swedish are the two national languages maintained by the same school-system in primarily separate Finnish- and Swedish-medium schools, with a population of around 296,000 speakers of Swedish as L1 compared to around 4.9 million speakers of Finnish (for a fairly recent overview of the linguistic educational contexts in Finland and the other Nordic countries, see [1]; see also [2] for further insights into the debate around the bilingual school situation in Finland). This paper reports

on an ongoing research project with the aim of exploring the development of a learning community focused on Language Across the Curriculum (henceforth LAC) in a context where the school language (Swedish) is surrounded and much influenced by the national majority language in practically all domains: the city and its surrounding municipalities, (national) media and nearly all spare-time activities students can enroll into. The school in question is a private school founded in 1892, with the aim of maintaining the Swedish language for the Swedish-speaking population in the area (currently ca 450 Swedish-speakers out of close to 85,000 inhabitants). The school offers Swedish-medium education from Kindergarten to upper secondary school with close to 350 students at present. Being a popular school, not only Swedish-speaking or bilingual families opt for this school for their children; close to 70% of the students use Finnish as their home language.

The research project came about as the school felt a need to enhance their efforts to support the development of the students' proficiency in Swedish, particularly in light of recent results in the subject in the matriculation exam. The school and its supporting foundation turned to Åbo Akademi University for facilitation in the form of a 3-year research and development project. As a researcher working with LAC and action research, I became the facilitator for the part of the project working with didactics for LAC with teachers in grades 1 to 9.

The project as a whole comprises four parts: support for leadership and restructuring of the organization; supporting Swedish in Kindergarten and pre-school; LAC in grades 1 to 9; a life-world and aesthetic dimension through a literature-based musical project in upper secondary school. This competence, in brief, includes teachers' enhancing demands as well as support (strategies) for students' reading, writing and speaking Swedish across the curriculum and across the school years. Thus, this paper reports on the process of introducing LAC throughout all grades of comprehensive school, a process that started in the academic year 2017–2018 with strategies for reading across subjects, combined with supported interaction to strengthen the students' learning of subject-related language; the ongoing academic year 2018–2019 is focused on strategies for writing in different genres across the curriculum; and summarizing activities will follow in the fall of 2019.

## II. LANGUAGE ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

The need for more focus on language awareness, language strategies and language support for enhanced learning in all school subjects have been stressed in a variety of multilingual contexts since the 1970s. That is also when the field was given its name: *Language Across the Curriculum*, e.g. in Canada. As the PISA tests, launched in 1997, have shown a repeated general decrease in reading comprehension for the European student population as a whole, but particularly among immigrant students and boys (e.g. [3]), demands for action on different levels have been asked for. In Finland, the role of language for all learning has been given more prominence in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014 ([4]) implemented from 2016 onwards, e.g. through increased focus on language awareness and multiliteracy as a competence that needs to imbue all education. This entails the support for all students to develop a more subject-related language, often called cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) alongside their basic interpersonal conversation skills (BICS), a distinction originally proposed by Cummins (e.g. [5]). On a more hands-on level, LAC often concerns crucial issues such as the overall contextualization of educational content to support students' understanding, developing and supporting strategies for reading comprehension, e.g. through structured text discussions, and developing writing strategies for different purposes and genres of texts required in specific school-subjects (see e.g. [6]; see also [7]; [8]; [9]).

However, despite the growing need for LAC in educational contexts, particularly as the number of students with another first language than the language of schooling has steadily increased in most contexts, the implementation of the field has been slow. What reference [10] stated more than a decade ago can still be said to be generally true: "nobody seems to have responsibility at the moment, neither at school nor in university, for this type of qualification in subject-specific language competence, for conceptualising language learning in this holistic way and for coordinating and supervising the development of a whole school language education policy. These are some of the issues which have to be considered and solved urgently on a local, national and European level" (p. 10).

## III. DEVELOPING A LEARNING COMMUNITY AROUND LAC

A *learning community*, in this case in connection to schools and educational development, is often termed a professional learning community (PLC) both in research literature and in more practice-related circumstances signifying an array of endeavors. Here, the definition of reference [11] of PLCs as *communities of continuous inquiry and improvement* will also define the learning community (see also e.g. [12] on the concept of learning community). In such a process, school development

cannot be seen as separate from teachers' professional development (cf. [13]).

How, then, can LAC be implemented in schools through a process leading to sustainable praxis, creating and boosting a learning community? The challenges are overall the same as in other forms of continuous professional development (henceforth CPD): how can teachers gain access to new competence and how can that competence become part of a sustainable implementation in the everyday work of teachers?

According to reference [14], CPD efforts with sustainable results are built on collegial learning where the teachers engage in efforts intended to show measurable changes in students' results. Also e.g. reference [15] stress the benefits of collegial professional development through mentor-coaching where teachers have the possibility to discuss methods, plan together and be supported by others in their professional role. Metastudies by e.g. reference [16] support these results, summarizing successful CPD as collaborative, systematic and on a long-term basis, building on school-based activities, observations of each other's teaching, mutual reflections of observed teaching and containing input by external expertise (see also [12]). In addition, the work should have its starting-point in contextual needs rather than the individual content interests of the teachers, and be systematically monitored and evaluated. This entails a delicate balance, as research show less successful results of CPD efforts where teachers are given directives from above or from the outside and forced to implement standardized solutions. Also, evaluations show that successful CPD efforts are among those where a long-term focus can be kept despite the constant demand for a variety of educational development actions to be taken from different stakeholders. Since the mid-1970s, CPD efforts in collaboration with educational researchers with focus on the facilitation of topical issues have steadily increased (see e.g. [17]; [18]). Explicit benefits that are stressed are the possibilities for more sustainable changes in educational praxis as a result of a more prolonged and scaffolded process, particularly compared to CPD in the form of individual participation in one-day courses and lecture-type sessions. Currently, the trend also in Finland is towards more holistic approaches between and within pre-service education and in-service CPD (cf. [13]). Still, although being research-based, we cannot take for granted that a specific educational solution work in all contexts, thus the need for development of site-based solutions (cf. [19]; [18]; see also [20]). In practice, collegial and collaborative CPD endeavors can be framed in a variety of ways. For example, all of the following entail similarities concerning the above-mentioned success-related elements of collegial collaboration and systematic follow-up of results: lesson study, co-teaching, research circles and action research. Notable for a context such as Finland is that teacher education may be research-based on Master's level, but despite this beneficial footing, educational sites do not necessarily form sustainable learning communities: subject teachers in particular have a long tradition of working individually in their classrooms rather than collaboratively, and schools need better support

structures that allow and ask for sharing and collaboration (cf. [13]). This includes collaboration across subjects, something that is also addressed in the National Core Curriculum for Basic Education 2014. In this project, action research (henceforth AR) has imbued both the work with didactics for LAC and the research projects as a whole, with the aim of exploring how to create a learning community around LAC. The main reason for the choice of AR is its emphasis on improving practice in accordance with the value basis of education (in this case, democratic access to education and learning; thus the need for strategies supporting learning across all subjects), and in accordance with AR principles of starting from the needs of local sites (see e.g. [17]). This as opposed to adhering to prescribed curricular content and lesson plans followed by testing, so-called ‘teaching for the test’. Similarly, the mentoring of the teachers within the project has focused less on supervising the implementation of didactic methods and more on strengthening a reflective praxis among colleagues, in accordance with the emphasis of integrating theory and practice through reflection in the pre-service as well as in the in-service stages of teacher education in Finland (see e.g. [20]; [21]; [22]). Such a process can be supported when activities are structured around the action research principles of *planning*, *acting*, *observing* and *reflecting*, which also suggests an ongoing process signifying a learning community.

Reference [23] points to the responsibility of the teacher to develop in her profession; however, to be able to fulfill this demand the system must be such that the teacher is provided with support and resources to enable this process (see also [24]). International research shows that to lay the foundations for well-functioning quality development in schools, school leaders need to be well acquainted with the daily practices of the school, distinct and explicit in the communication of their educational leadership as well as able to communicate and establish the school’s core values or ethos. Reference [16], among others, point to how an increased exchange between principals and teachers around educational and didactical questions lead to increased engagement and learning among teachers, which in turn concretely affects their praxis. Such an ongoing dialogue needs to be part of a systematic quality work involving all teachers, not only those who are willing and interested. At the same time, the teachers’ professionalism must be respected, so that focus is put on the context and specific aspects as prerequisites for change rather than focusing on what individual teachers (cf. [24]).

#### A. The Work Process at the Project Site

The three-year process of CPD for LAC in the school is structured around regular visits by the researcher/facilitator, mainly consisting two consecutive days at least four times per academic year, with activities including lectures and didactic (café) discussions, workshops, classroom observations and facilitator-mentoring after observations (for an overview of facilitated meetings 2017–2018, see Table 1).

TABLE I. OVERVIEW OF FACILITATED MEETINGS 2017–2018

Aug 2017	Introduction: “What is LAC and how can it be implemented in a learning community?”
Nov 2017	Day 1: Didactic café; Day 2: Classroom observations and facilitator-mentoring
Jan 2018	Day1: Didactic café (general feedback on observations); Day 2: Classroom observations and facilitator-mentoring
March 2018	One-day workshop: Strategies for reading; small-groups planning for implementing and shadowing
April 2018	Day 1: Didactic café (follow-up on strategies for reading); Day 2: Classroom observations and facilitator-mentoring

Both before and during the project, the school has worked with what they call didactic cafés, i.e. whole-staff meetings where topical issues are shared and explored, as well as shadowing, i.e. observing the teaching of colleagues. Before the project, the shadowing was restricted to general observations rather than systematic focus on some new aspect to be tried out and discussed to find ways to improve praxis. Both forms of collegial work processes were picked up and structured around the AR principles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting for the overall CPD process to become more systematic and focused, i.e. small-group planning and reflective discussions surrounding the shadowing, to implement the didactics for LAC as competence is built.

LAC activities developed by the teachers, both individually and in groups, are now being uploaded into a network drive for sharing between colleagues, but also to eventually build a resource for other schools that wish to develop their competence in the field.

#### IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

As described in section III, the methodology employed throughout the project is action research. Both as a work process and as a research methodology, a common characteristic entails some more or less dynamic variety of the self-reflective spiral originally suggested by social psychologist Kurt Lewin and consisting of the above-mentioned steps: *planning*, *action*, *observation*, and *reflection*. Although e.g. reference [18] suggest the process be seen as more dynamic than a strict set of steps – and that the most central is the interrogation of the actual practice itself – the spiral of above-mentioned steps has shown to be a concrete scaffold for participants to structure their AR work in a focused manner. Such scaffolding is particularly helpful considering the limited time span for AR in relation to teachers’ work. At the current site, the situation was explored through discussions with leadership and staff in the planning stages, complemented by the researcher’s observations. The actual CPD process that was planned

for, i.e., the action step, builds on research into LAC and site-based CPD, observation through data gathered in follow-up interviews (see below), ongoing site observations, and continuously reflected on through the researcher's journal. After the first year, more in-depth reflections on the process so far are documented in this paper, as the planning for the following set of steps in the spiral is done to further support the building of a learning community around LAC. Additionally, teachers' LAC activities are continuously being uploaded to a network drive to be analyzed at a later point. So far, interviews have been conducted with the same five teachers from a variety of subjects (not language teachers) teaching at different levels, first in November 2017 with a follow-up in May 2018. The first set of interviews were helpful in the continuous planning of the following stages.

In order to explore whether the process so far can suggest the cultivation of a stronger learning community, interviews have been analyzed with the following project research questions in focus:

*RQ1*: Has the process affected teachers' teaching practice, in that case how?

*RQ2*: How has the process affected the collaboration between teachers?

*RQ3*: How is LAC recontextualized into the teachers' conceptions (in particular regarding their conceptual development and collegial use of professionally oriented language)?

The interviews were conducted by a research assistant to create some necessary distance to the facilitator/researcher. The interviews have been transcribed and undergone an inductive qualitative content analysis in several phases around the research questions, with the overall focus on the process of the becoming of a learning community around LAC (cf. [25]; [26]). In the first phase, initial themes were identified, the following focused identification of key themes and possible patterns within these. These were then labelled to capture the phenomena and the key dimensions of teachers' experiences of the process so far (cf. [27]) and will be illustrated by descriptive statements from the data, translated from Swedish into English. For this purpose, the five teachers have been assigned with the letters A to E, with quotations annotated as their first (1) or second (2) interview, e.g. B1, C2 etc.

Research and development projects where researchers are involved in both dimensions always call for a discussion of the objectivity of the research. However, as long as means to create a distance in the process are ensured, triangulation of data is used as a basic requirement to strengthen the validity of findings, and all stages of the research process are thoroughly encountered for, the involvement in and thereby in-depth understanding of a particular site can also be seen as a strength (cf. [17]). To further strengthen the validity, the number of teachers interviewed will be broadened and group interviews with students will be conducted during 2019. Throughout the process, findings are fed back to participants for validation. This aspect also concerns the democratic foundation signifying AR principles: the researcher

consulting with participants and learning the site while working as a facilitator of change, rather than conducting research on teachers ([18]).

## V. FINDINGS

The six key dimensions extracted and explored from the interviews connected to the building of a learning community around LAC are the following: *shared situational awareness*; *support from leadership*; *external input for competence building*; *closer collaboration*; *individual learning processes* and *time constraints*. The findings suggest that a prevailing awareness among staff of the need for them to focus more on supporting learning through the school language combined with a collegial CPD endeavor around didactics for LAC have been fruitful starting points for taking the necessary steps towards an increase in engagement and concrete efforts: *I've gotten a deeper insight into my own teaching aims [...] where I want us to reach (D2)*; *[The project so far] has had nothing but a positive effect [...] we've learned that we already do a lot [...] but also become more aware [...] how to go about (E2)*; *[...] we get more tools (C2)*. In this process, support from leadership has been crucial: *Since it also comes from "above", so it's clear this is to be discussed and this (E2)*. This increase in activities is shown both in the form of individual efforts to plan activities for LAC to be included in one's praxis, as well as the collaboration of groups of teachers around including reading strategies in different subjects in targeted classrooms.

Although collaboration generally has been good, it has increased during the project: *[...] we notice that we all strive towards a common goal (C2)*; *Since everyone is aware of what we- what this [process] is about now, it might be that this circle of staff actively involved has grown (D2)*. The strengthening of a learning community is also shown through the formation of teams to more systematically plan, shadow and reflect on LAC implementations in each other's teaching. Before the project, the shadowing was restricted to general observations to see the students in other contexts and get ideas for one's own teaching rather than systematic focus on some new aspect to be tried out and discussed to find ways to improve praxis: *So others see that this is what the students are like during my lesson (A2)*; *You get good ideas from how they work with their pupils in lower grades (B2)*. To some extent, this is still the case, which shows the need for further facilitation. The majority of post-teaching discussions seems to have been either omitted or postponed due to time constraints: *We don't have the time to sit down and reflect and go through and so on (E2)*.

Another crucial aspect that has been brought to light outside the interviews concerns the sensitivity connected to providing colleagues with criticism, albeit of a constructive nature, in connection with shadowing activities. It is suggested that commenting on or suggesting improvements regarding the performance of colleagues requires some sort of strong mandate or assignment, e.g. a process that explicitly asks for the next stage to involve further development of implementation efforts.

The learning process for individual teachers shows much variation, with many teachers working actively to include strategies for LAC in their teaching and uploading activities on the network drive: *You save so much time by discussing and sharing* (E1). Others are involved to a much lesser degree. It is understandable that the challenges for a PE or arts teacher to include didactics for LAC become greater when strategies for reading or writing are focused. For them the dimension of an increased demand for supported interaction in the medium of schooling is more on topic, and will receive further facilitation during year 2.

However, the challenges might also concern individual differences regarding how the didactics for LAC are introduced and worked with, often accentuated by time constraints. The great majority of teachers prefer presentations in connection to workshops and/or didactic cafés to individual reading activities, which are seen to take too much time and effort to engage in on one's own. There is also variation regarding how useful colleagues find the setup of didactic cafés: some find it useful to hear what other subjects and grades are developing and, similarly, appreciate the shadowing done in mixed groups of subjects and levels of teaching, whereas others would like to focus more on working with specific topics together with teachers of the same subjects and/or grades: *And the best is to go into the lower grades and above all to shadow colleagues who teach something completely different* (D2); *Sure, [shadowing of lower levels] was nice, but I don't know how much it contributed to my own development* (A2).

Possibly the process of coming together for the creation of shared understanding has been long enough for some teachers: they are now ready to focus more on the concrete tasks at hand that they find most on point for their own teaching, some in small-groups, other still individually. However, they also see that they need the possibility to regularly bring forward important issues: [...] *above all, if there's something one feels the need to discuss it can be done there* (D2). At a minimum, since meetings tend to take place late afternoons, they need to be supported by the leadership and efficiently managed with a variation of setups and content that teachers find meaningful since there is no time to waste: *What we need is time [---] it has to come from the leadership, nobody's going to volunteer to stay late to do big projects* (E1); [...] *the person leading the café needs to have a [...] clear theme [...] a café discussion feels like you can throw out anything, but sometimes it feels like you'd like to get further, too [...] or suggest new themes when discussions slow down* (A2). In addition, the success of whole-staff discussions is also connected to how active the teachers have been so that there are new aspects to share: *It's a necessity that many of us have made changes, done something, otherwise we'll have less to discuss* (D2). This can then work as a necessary gear to drive the process on: *I think it was an eye-opener for us in higher grades to see [...] how far [grades 1 and 2] had come and at the same time that it doesn't have to be that difficult to include language aspects* (C2).

Thus, between the first and second interview, there is a general sense of more collaboration and sharing of awareness and understanding among staff. Their expectations and early experiences of the process seem to have been confirmed and strengthened by the ongoing process. However, a new aspect that surfaced in the second interview concerns RQ3: conceptual development and collegial use of professionally oriented language. A recent development of shared vocabulary for discussing educational issues was stressed particularly by one of the informants, e.g. when referring to concrete reading strategies that have become familiar to all colleagues through the project: *And this didactic discussion is now more maybe in another way [...] we use the same concepts, we use the same words- expressions for what we're working with* (D2).

What about student reactions to the teachers' efforts to transform praxis? According to the teachers, the increased demands on students to focus their use of the school language in more subjects than Swedish has not caused very strong reactions. They suggest that for most of the younger and older students at least, it entails something positive since it supports their learning in a Swedish-medium school: *They do understand that we're there for their benefit* (D2). However, it also entails increased demands regarding proficiency and, particularly for the teenagers, a challenge to the routines of many of them who use Finnish between themselves as their everyday language even in the classroom. Still, for the most part, the teenaged students do not seem that involved: *I think they just see it as teaching* (A2).

## VI. CONCLUSION

Considering the well-documented challenges of translating new knowledge into praxis in connection to teacher education and traditional professional development courses (see e.g. [16]), the ongoing CPD for LAC process has been set up in accordance with what a majority of research suggests to be beneficial elements for the process of successful cultivation of a sustainable learning community. The benefits of more directly developing areas where teachers at a specific site experience challenges and collaboratively embedding such didactic knowledge into participants' daily routines are often stressed, particularly as opposed to the results from individual teachers attending CPD as day-based trainings and isolated lectures ([19]; [18]; [13]). Reference [16] point to the importance of systematic development work on a long-term basis, building on school-based activities, observations of each other's teaching, mutual reflections of observed teaching with input from external expertise (see also [12]). Here, the steps of the AR spiral has worked as a valuable support structure for systemizing the collegial work in addition to being the research methodology for the research project as a whole. The AR cycle entails a continuous learning process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. However, as pointed out by e.g. [28] (p. 444), if AR is to become a tool in professional development, it needs to be a starting point

for an ongoing process, for a stance or approach to teaching, not merely related to its use in a project.

Results so far evolves around the following six key dimensions: *shared situational awareness; support from leadership; external input for competence building; closer collaboration; individual learning processes and time constraints*. An important conclusion is that the foundations for change were already set at the start of the project: awareness of the importance of strengthening the efforts regarding strategies for the development of the school language, thus entailing a shared understanding to be built on, as well as support from the school leadership for a long-term CPD process (cf. [24]; [23]; [16]; see also [20] on challenges for CPD processes when conditions are less beneficial regarding such awareness and support). The small size of the project school can also be said to work as a benefit when it comes to gathering practically all staff around a common aim, with individual students recognized by the teachers throughout the school years.

Thus, the analysis of the data from the first cycle suggests an evolving learning community with focus on didactics for LAC. Strategies for reading as well as other language focused activities are developed and included in most teachers' praxis (RQ1), and collaboration between teachers in different subjects and with differing insights into working with LAC has become more systematic through regular didactic cafés and shadowing (RQ2). As a consequence of the above, we see an emerging development and use of professionally oriented language to efficiently inform and discuss activities both during staff collaboration and in teachers' day-to-day praxis (RQ3).

However, there are also challenges that needs to be addressed and further facilitated. One crucial issue concerns time constraints and how to organize a systematic and efficient use of the resources provided so that teachers find the process worthwhile. It should be noted that the collegial efforts to strengthen collaboration between teachers of different subjects and different grades, primarily the discussions and small-group planning during didactic cafés and shadowing, form an informed and necessary gear to drive the process on although not every teacher is involved to the same degree. Besides supporting a more long-term development, joint collaborative planning invites to a climate more open to common reflections on the outcome. A particularly supportive dimension could be found in the possibility for teachers in grades 1 and 2 to work with and support the staff in Kindergarten and pre-school and act as a bridge between the early stages and the third grade, a stage in education when demands on reading for comprehension in different subjects increases exponentially and preparation and continued support often is crucial. Teachers' answers as well as observations also show that further support needs to be built in regarding the sensitive issue of openly discussing each other's classroom praxis. Since such discussion forms an important aspect for an ongoing process of didactic competence building to occur, further support will be facilitated in the following stages.

Thus, what can be seen so far is in line with previous research regarding conditions that promote and support a

learning community defined by an ongoing process of competence building towards sustainable change through CPD efforts. However, this ongoing process would still benefit from being part of a systematic quality work involving all teachers, not only those who are willing and able, and challenges the facilitator to further support individual learning processes within a necessary collaborative framework. One way to include more teachers would be to allow enough leeway within the structured process for more individualized efforts and needs, as long as there is a shared vision and understanding of the goal that drives the process forward. Teachers' professionalism should be respected, so that focus is put on the context and specific aspects as prerequisites for change rather than focusing on what individual teachers do, or do not do (cf. [24]; see also [13]).

Further steps to be taken include more explicit focus on the students' awareness of the reasons for and benefits gained through explicit work with LAC. An important sign of a strong learning community in this context would be that not only all teachers but also all students stop reacting to LAC activities as an exception to how non-language subjects such as history, biology and chemistry be taught. That way, the learning community could keep evolving also after the end of the project. A sustainable process needs long-term support rather than to be rushed and forced through: *I think what's needed first is a process of maturity within the teachers, And then trial and error. That's how development takes place* (D2).

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