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Enacting educational partnership: collective identity, decision making (and the importance of muffin chat).

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Abstract

The rhetoric of partnership is ubiquitous in the current policy context. In education, partnerships take a number of forms among which is 'interorganizational collaboration' (IOC), defined as a partnership between institutions/organizations aimed at developing synergistic solutions to complex problems. But policy has a tendency to veneer, obscuring its enactment. The purpose of this paper is therefore to examine what such partnerships look like on the ground. Here we present an empirical analysis which aims to produce knowledge about the working of such collaborative groups and to provide insights into leadership within such partnerships. Drawing on communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) operationalised within a schema for understanding the emergence of collective identity in IOC, we undertake an analysis of meetings held by a working group comprising academics and local authority staff set up to develop masters level work-based professional learning for teachers. We ask, how do professionals working within different contexts create a collective identity that supports decision making, and what are the implications for leadership?

Keywords communicative constitution of organizations (CCO), collaborative working, critical colleague, interorganizational collaboration (IOC), laughter in meetings, leadership, organization, professional learning

Introduction

'Partnership', in education policy as elsewhere, has recently been accorded privileged status. Partnership has been described as a policy 'panacea' (Kennedy and Doherty 2012) so firmly established in the current policy climate that its ability as a universal fixer seems beyond question. Cardini goes even further, describing partnership as a 'magic concept' which, because it evokes comforting ideas of networking, collaboration and trust 'sounds modern, neutral, pragmatic and positive' (Cardini 2006, 396). A concept acquires magical status if it is in fashion, if it has normative connotations, suggests consensus, has acquired global standing, and especially if it has many meanings (Hupe and Pollitt 2010). A magic concept disguises its ideology behind a veil of neutrality while simultaneously orchestrating a range of enactments and practices through which its truth is materialised. This, of course, is sleight of hand, but in case we get too carried away with the cynicism endemic to academia it is as well to remember, as Hupe and Pollitt (2010, 23) point out, that:

Magic concepts can certainly perform positive as well as negative functions. They can significantly facilitate new orientations and frameworks, initiate the launch of new research strategies, stimulate campaigns for additional resources, and a number of other developments. Above all, magic concepts have the capacity to mobilize and to enhance the formation of new coalitions; within academia, within practice and particularly across their borders. These are not small or unimportant qualities. The multiple meanings and ambiguity of concepts like these implies that they may be used equally for 'white magic' or 'black magic'.

Or indeed for many shades of grey.

Partnership has arisen within the discourse which has seen a global movement away from government and towards governance, a fairly magical concept in its own right, which signifies a *disaggregation* of hierarchical government in favour of the network (Levi-Faur 2011). 'Good governance', say Pollitt and Hupe (2011, 647), 'is said to entail the steering of society through networks and partnerships between governments, business corporations and civil society associations', thereby finding common interest in these three domains.

Cardini (2006) outlines three forms of organizational cooperation that have been referred to as 'educational partnerships' in the UK. First, there are those collaborations between public purchasers and private providers (as in Public Private Partnerships, PPPs) which have funded school building programmes across the UK. Next, inter/professional and inter/agency partnerships providing 'joined up solutions' to 'joined up problems. This second type of partnership usually refers to client-based services such as links between social work, health and education. Finally, there are partnerships which 'promote collaboration between different institutions or between institutions and agents' (Cardini 2006, 399). This third type, which may be called *interorganizational* collaboration (IOC) , is characterized by Hardy et al (2005, 58) as a 'relationship in which participants rely on neither market nor hierarchical mechanisms of control to gain cooperation from each other'. Hardy et al further define *effective* IOC is that which:

- (1) leverages the difference among participants to produce innovative, synergistic solutions and
- (2) balances divergent stakeholder concerns. (Hardy et al 2005, 58)

Throughout the UK the growth in this third type of partnership in education is evident, and in Scotland has been given added impetus by the influential review of teacher education *Teaching Scotland's future* (Donaldson 2010). As a result of the recommendations made in this report all local authorities (LA) and universities undertaking teacher education in Scotland are required to enter into polygamistic unions. Indeed, the requirement for formalised partnership agreements between universities and LAs has given rise to new high level management practices around the signing of concordats designed to suffuse partnership with symbolic ritual (if not a little magic). But such policy injunctions gloss over the actual functioning of partnerships, the examination of which requires close-grained analysis, and this is what this paper aims to address. In particular, the paper asks how is partnership enacted on the ground? How do professionals working within different contexts create a collective identity that supports effective collaboration and what are the implications for leadership? This is not just of interest to academics researching organizations and processes of organizing. Understanding and marshalling the discursive resources drawn on by participants engaged in IOC is critical to facilitating and leading collaborations that meet Hardy et al's (2005) criteria for effectiveness, a central concern for educational leaders at all levels of the education system. This paper therefore presents an

empirical analysis of IOC which aims to examine collaboration between organizations and provide insights into the leadership which emerges within such collaborations. We start by outlining the conceptual framework for the analysis, in which the achievement of a collective identity is seen as central. We then set out the empirical case to be examined here, a collaboration between a university and its partner LAs which had as its task the development of a model of work-based masters learning with the aim of enhancing educational practice. The project was predicated on the notion that in order to secure systemic improvement and benefits for pupils masterliness must be conceived within a theory/practice nexus which embeds teacher professional learning in the sites of practice and this, in turn, necessitates partnership between schools, local authorities, and universities. The aim of the work was to contribute to the development of capability and capacity leading to the realization of what Hargreaves (2011) has called the 'self-improving school system'.

Interorganizational collaboration and collective identity

Recent work in organization studies has focused on micro-level processes of sense-making, 'the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing' (Weick et al 2005, 409). Sense-making is about recognizing the importance of the small and the mundane, and to recognize that 'smallness does not equate with insignificance' (410). In this view, processes of *organizing*, conceived as a fluid and dynamic process shifting between order and disorder mediated via texts, are privileged over 'organization'. However Cooren et al (2011, 1153), while generally supportive of this approach, warn that it 'runs the risk of downplaying the very question of the constitution of organizational forms'. Instead, they advocate the adoption of an approach they refer to as communicative constitution of organization (CCO):

Organizations can no longer be seen as objects, entities, or 'social facts' inside of which communication occurs. Organizations are portrayed, instead, as ongoing and precarious accomplishments realized, experienced, and identified primarily – if not exclusively – *in* communication processes'. (Cooren et al, 2011, 1150)

CCO recognizes that organizations are brought into being through communication but 'refuses to choose between studying how people get organized and how organizations come to be re-enacted and reproduced through these activities' (1153). CCO scholarship therefore ensures a concern both with macro-level (discourse) and micro-level (sense-making) aspects of being organized/organizing. Organizations are therefore talked into being but this mobilisation occurs within discourses which provide subject positions for identification (Althusser 1971). A key construct for understanding the processes by which organizations are talked into being is therefore *identity*. Despite Abdelal et al's (2006, 695) well-aimed swipe at the 'ubiquitous sprawl of scholarship that has undermined the conceptual clarity of identity' and Ashmore et al's (2004, 80) more restrained comment that 'the concept is called on to bear far more theoretical, empirical, and political weight than it can support', identity – individual and collective – remains a useful and important construct in theorizing organization and forms a key aspect of CCO scholarship. Thus, in setting out the 'Montreal School' of CCO Cooren et al (2011) distinguish between two forms of communication, conversation and texts, which are pertinent in this respect. Conversations are the forms of communication carried on across organizations; texts are both the products of conversations and the 'raw material' for these conversations. Together 'these communicative products condense a myriad of conversations into a single abstract representation of collective identity and intention which is necessary in coordinating and controlling collective action' (Cooren et al 2011, 1155). While this may suggest a process of distillation of identity to a common and stable core this would be misleading; a perspective which takes into account the discursive construction of a collective identity (or more paradoxically, perhaps, collective identities) must also look beyond such apparent reifications towards the performance of identities and the positioning of self in relation to the other, with all the tensions, ambiguities and ambivalence this implies (Watson 2007). Collective identity is not therefore a defining entity possessed of a group but a more precarious phenomenon, an ongoing achievement of group members and a resource to be drawn on. Cooren et al (2011) therefore argue that the discursive construction of collective identity is key to effective organizational working. Hardy et al (2005) claim that this is similarly the case for *interorganizational* collaboration in which the discursive achievement of collective identity arguably presents an even greater challenge with participants bringing

with them all the baggage of their respective organizations from which a shared way forward must be wrested.

The formation of collective identity is therefore a central concern for understanding how partnership is enacted. Consequently, analysis of conversations and the texts that subtend these offers potential to provide insights into the construction and performance of collective identities. While setting out the tenets of CCO, Cooren et al (2011) stop short of offering this as a prescribed methodology. CCO is not a means for examining processes of organizing; neither is it a 'unified enterprise' (1153). CCO offers theoretical insights rather than methodological guidance. We therefore draw on a framework provided by Hardy et al (2005) to analyse conversations and texts as a means to understand the ways in which collective identity is mobilised and the factors which mediate the construction and performance of collective identities.

Hardy et al hypothesise that a collective identity is constructed around two forms of relationship which they term *generalized membership ties* and *particularized membership ties* (the reader will appreciate why we have chosen not to use an acronym). Generalized membership ties relate to the task at hand and how members orientate to this, 'the conversations that define an issue in a particular way and that connect organizations to that issue' (64). Generalized membership ties therefore relate to and are constrained within the wider discourses which serve to legitimate the issue at hand. They thus refer to what Cooren et al (2011) describe as the ways in which people 'get organized'. Particularized membership ties, on the other hand, depend on relationships formed between members of the group and the roles that they perform within the group:

These ties describe status, authority and task-role relationships, as well as affiliative and collegial relations...The conversations that produce particularized membership ties are those that refer to specific persons, places, and objects and, consequently, provide a set of discursive resources from which participants can position themselves as connected in specific identifiable ways. (64-65)

Particularized membership ties concern micro-political processes of partnership working and therefore relate to the ways in which 'organizations come to be re-enacted' through conversations/texts (Cooren et al 2011, 1153).

While generalized and particularized membership ties emerge from IOC they do not ensure that such collaboration is in Hardy et al's terms, *effective*. For this, Hardy et al hypothesize two further mediating factors as the tensions arising among and between private/common constructions of key issues and assertive/cooperative styles of talk. In order for the task to be carried out group members must rally around key issues. Common constructions of key issues are essential to enable the group to make sense of the task and to coordinate collective action. However, private constructions of key issues are also necessary to ensure diversity and foster creativity and innovation. Such private constructions may emerge from the members' affiliations with and legitimate concerns of their own organizations, thereby ensuring that group members do not go (entirely) native. They therefore relate to the discourses inhabited by participants in their 'home' organizations and the identities this gives rise to. Styles of talk constitute the second mediating construct necessary to ensure effective IOC. Hardy et al hypothesize that cooperative talk signals a willingness for the group members to think of themselves as 'we' and 'us', thereby reinforcing common constructions and promoting collective identity. Assertive talk, on the other hand, challenges common constructions, promoting 'synergistic, rather than simply compromising, outcomes' (70). Such assertive talk involves the positioning of self in relation to the other within the IOC context and is therefore concerned with the construction and performance of identities. The balance between on the one hand private/common constructions and assertive/cooperative talk is, Hardy et al claim, essential to maintain a positive relationship between collective identity and effective IOC. In this paper we adopt Hardy et al's framework as a means to operationalise CCO in examining the collaboration between the university and its partner local authorities. We thus examine the data for the emergent themes pertinent to the framework. However, we also examine the claims made for the framework itself with the context of CCO.

The case: promoting teaching as a masters-level profession

The case examined here concerns a partnership formed between a Scottish university and four local authorities (LA), in 2014. This was in response to a Scottish Government policy mandate aimed at developing closer links between the higher education sector, as a provider of professional education, and local government as teacher employers. In the kind of partnership work reported here, establishing collective identities and reinforcing positive social bonds is crucial since the group cannot rely on hierarchy or money to enforce cooperation, it therefore accords with the definition set out by Cardini (2006) of partnerships aimed at promoting collaboration between institutions. Following formation of the partnership, the steering group set up to enact the process identified masters-level learning as a key area necessary to support sustainable career-long professional learning¹ Further, in keeping with the spirit of the partnership, and in accord with desire to develop capacity and capability for school improvement, the steering group advised that the project should examine ways in which schools could take more ownership of this as part of a discursive shift from outsourced CPD (continuing professional development) to school-based 'professional learning' (Watson and Michael 2015). In truth, the steering group itself was responding to a pretty strong steer from government as set out in the National Implementation Board's (2012) response to *Teaching Scotland's Future* (Donaldson 2010) which stated:

The McKinsey Report on the characteristics of the best performing school systems across the world identified a drive towards making teaching a Masters Level profession as a key element in many such systems. *Teaching Scotland's Future* suggested that there would be value in increasing the opportunities for teachers to undertake masters level learning that could lead to the award of qualifications. The NPG endorses this view and considers that there would be clear benefits in making a strategic commitment to move towards making teaching in Scotland a masters level profession. (NIB 2012, 13)

In light of this a working group (WG) was formed to take the initiative forward and funding was secured from the Scottish Government to support the development of a practice-based module undertaken in the work-place leading to the award of 30 Scottish Masters credits.

The WG comprised:

- 4 academic staff of the university
- 2 research assistants (both full time PhD students)
- 4 staff from partner LAs nominated by the steering group: two head teachers, a principal teacher (all currently serving in schools in their respective local authorities), and a senior LA member of staff involved in managing the provision of continuing professional development (CPD) for teaching staff.

The WG can be regarded as largely self-organizing, both in terms of the task to be undertaken, albeit within the broad remit outlined, and the means for carrying it out. It was however subject to a range of institutional constraints, for example, the university regulations covering degrees and the award of credit, and the requirements of the newly revised suite of professional Standards for teachers produced by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS 2012a-c).

Thus, at the outset the WG had two undertakings:

- To set out the nature of the task and shape its orientation to the task;
- To constitute itself to and for itself.

The first of these tasks relates to the production of generalized membership ties and focuses on the development of common/private understandings concerning the nature of the task and the tools/technologies needed to carry it out; the second concerns particularized membership ties and the positioning of self in relation to the other. These tasks are interrelated and this paper considers both aspects.

The WG held four half-day meetings over the course of 6 months at which the model of work-based professional learning was developed. In addition, the WG split into three subgroups to work on specific tasks around: course content, support for participants, and assessment. In order to examine the processes of partnership working all meetings of the working group (though not the subgroups) were audio-recorded and following each meeting all members of the WG were asked to provide an email in response to the question: 'what happened at the meeting today?' to assess the extent to which a common understanding had emerged. Audio recordings were transcribed in full and subjected to narrative analysis (Watson 2012) drawing on the conceptual framework provided by Hardy et al (2005) to

identify sequences demonstrating private/common constructions and assertive/cooperative talk.

The emergence of collective identity and the production of membership ties

The WG comprised members of two distinct types of organizations: the university and local government. However, it was apparent that different cultural norms pertained within each of the local authorities represented which in turn differed from those of the university. Respective roles played within their own organizations by group members also added diversity to the mix. In some respects all members shared broad constitutive norms (Abdelal et al 2006, 697) which may be considered a necessary foundation for the emergence of collective identity. Thus a concern, as educators, with children's learning and teacher professional development (however these might be constructed by individual members) provided points of mutual recognition. In addition, the formal nature of the partnership between the university and its partner local authorities and its reduction to an acronym (which in the interests of anonymity we do not reveal here) arguably contributed to the development of a shared sense of identity within the group. In other respects, of course, as representatives of distinct organizations with a range of legitimate interests our perspectives and priorities necessarily differed. For the university, generation of research income and knowledge production/exchange were key motivating factors. For the local authorities access to, and the opportunity to influence the development of, high quality CPD to support policy around career-long professional learning was uppermost. For both of us partnership working was policy-mandated and subject to government inspection by HMIE. There were thus commonalities and differences, and in analysing the data it was apparent that, though congruence was achieved, difference was never eroded and continued to influence the IOC in both positive and negative ways. Hence the establishment of collective identity, within the context of effective IOC, necessarily entails the maintenance of particular institutional and organizational identities.

In taking a broad overview of the data from the four meetings a number of issues concerning the establishment of collective identity and the creation of generalized and particularized membership ties emerged which are discussed below.

Generalized membership ties

Generalized membership ties concern the orientation of the group to the task. In CCO terms this relates to the discourses that serve to 'organize' members. In examining the data it was evident that the generation of these ties was mediated by particular objects, notably, at the outset a diagram representing the possible course structure in which the work-based modules would be embedded.

The structure was intended to convey the pattern of modules envisaged in the overall MSc programme with 'traditional' university-based courses (represented on the diagram as squares) interspersed, in a variety of ways, with work-based modules (ovals), of which Figure 1 presents one configuration.

[insert Figure 1 here]

Thus, the problem set for the WG was the development of the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices within the work-based modules. The diagram quickly gave rise to the language of *squares* and *ovals*. Indeed, this became so embedded that it was used beyond the confines of the WG by both university and local authority members (on one memorable occasion being used in a question directed to the Minister for Education at a conference on educational policy):

(In the transcripts U = university member; LA = local authority member, with individuals indicated by numbers. Transcripts have been translated into written text with conventional punctuation to aid reading).

Extract from WG meeting 1:

U1: We have the funding, it will be in here, but we have funding for twenty teachers to do the first square and the first oval and the, and we have asked each of the LA reps and the [partnership] group are recruiting five teachers from each local authority

LA1: Can I ask an obvious question before you come to the oval, can I go back to the square and ask, what does that 30 credits actually mean in practice, what does that look like and feel like? In terms of time and...

The diagram thus became a 'mediating instrument' (Miller and O'Leary 2007), a representational device around which participants orientated to the work of the group, thereby supporting the emergence of generalized membership ties. Such mediating instruments, Jorgensen et al (2012, 109) claim, are 'particularly relevant in inter-organizational collaborations that are more temporary and less structurally binding...such as project collaborations and industry networks'. In the case examined here the model of ovals and squares provided a language and a conceptualisation for examining key issues thereby supporting the development of a common construction of the problem. At the same time the uncharted nature of the ovals supported the maintenance of 'private constructions' which simultaneously created synergistic openings. The diagram therefore facilitated exploration of the problem, while also providing the opportunity to challenge thinking through assertive talk as demonstrated in the extract by LA1.

If ovals and squares provided a useful model within which to discursively conceptualise and shape the broad task then the main problematic emerged from the detailed consideration of the ovals as constituting the boundary of work-based professional learning. Decisions concerning the nature of this boundary made contingent subsequent decisions around the support for participants. The boundary of the oval was conceptualised by the WG as largely, though not entirely, impermeable to the university tutors since this, by definition, distinguished university modules from work-based learning. At the same time the university members of the WG were preoccupied with the need for ovals not to become 'distance learning' but in some way to belong to the LAs as part of the discursive shift to school-based professional learning mandated by policy. This decision necessitated alternative systems of support for participants. The framing, and particularly the *naming*, of this support therefore emerged as the key concern for the WG as illustrated in this part of the transcript (WG meeting 2):

LA1: I mean, this is a kind of tip of the iceberg discussion, but we are individualising this in-school support already, without full discussion about what the support, support in inverted commas, actually means and I kind of feel the need to go back to the first principles and look at squares and, em, ovals to see what kind of characteristics an oval has, how much it's taking on square like characteristics, how much it's a different animal and what that, the implications of those features are, for this support role in

you know broad terms, not necessarily individualising it out to one person at the moment

U3: I think that's a really good point and eh, I think it is the thing that we have been grappling with isn't it? It's what we need to do to make the programme, or it's what does make the programme distinct, but how then the two things articulate and what happens is, in each of them is really important that we are clear about this.

LA1: There would be a sort of default tendency to think of an oval as some sort of bit of, you know, practice on the ground type learning, following a formal input, but, it doesn't need to be that and I'm sure the way it's conceived is not exactly like that. I'm a bit vague as to what I think it's going to look like.

U3: Yes, but we all are

U2: We all are

This extract illustrates a number of issues pointing up the complexity of IOC. In sociomaterial terms ovals have agency and are key in organizing talk. The diagram, conceived as a mediating instrument, supported the development of generalized membership ties. Ovals and squares, as the bearers of meaning around accredited masters level learning, served to organize the WG and in turn the discussion around ovals and squares talked the partnership into being. (The micro-political aspect of positioning and the emergence of particularized membership ties through assertive talk is also demonstrated here.)

The eventual naming of the in-school support occurred during the third WG meeting:

U2: And did you have any final thoughts about the naming of the supporter?

U4: No, I liked the 'critical' and I think we've spoken about that last time but

U3: Yes it was 'critical'

U4: Could it be a 'critical colleague' who does that open it out, you know, because actually it also means that you could, everybody in a way, on to a kind of equitable

footing so it's not, cause you know, cause mentoring/coach is still slightly hierarchical so in a way a colleague could be at any, any level and it sort of

[various noises of agreement are expressed by the other members of the group]

U3: Think you've cracked it there, well done.

U4: Well that's up for...

The term 'critical colleague', as with the language of squares and ovals, was quickly taken up by all members of the WG. The naming of the in-school support as 'critical colleague' functioned as a kind of verbal mediating instrument, the personification shaping and influencing the later discussion. The decision that ovals should not be university-led distance learning but centred around practice in the work-place gave rise to a complex situation in which the roles of university tutors and the newly named 'critical colleagues', had to be negotiated. This blurring of the demarcation of boundaries between the university and schools was not unproblematic given the role of the university as keeper of accreditation and its bearing on the academic identities of tutors. The following section of the transcript spells this out:

U1: I don't think there should be direct support from the, for the participants from the tutors during the oval because that turns it into distance learning and this is something we have to break with that tradition, I'm not sure that they, they can, I would be happy that they would be part of some of the conversations but that isn't

U4: Well isn't the support in fact you've actually set up the oval in such a way that that structure and those choices and elements that they, it would be like school, you could choose one of those three, [laughs] one of those three, you know but you would, in a way they would then have to have done the sorts of things you would want them to engage with so you wouldn't, that would be the support in a way that you would put in and that will take effort and time to set up and it would need to be renewed because as we know for example there's been so much policy change this year that you have to update and change and

U1: There are real issues around that of trust for us. You know, really letting go of stuff that we need to be holding on to

LA3: There is a real element for the supporter to know they're doing the right thing. I think initially if I was going through that process I would want someone to say do you know what, this is what they've come up with, this is the sort of discussion you know. Guide me to a reading, guide me to a different question, that I could be asking them, you know, because if you become stuck with them it's not helpful really sort of

U2: really important point

U4: You could have a sort of bit that was a kind of online question bit that people could feed into and you would get public

U1: The tutor, the university tutor and the CC's (as I now call them) could be engaging.

LA3: The worry certainly for me is that I am not always, I will never be up to the speed that you guys are working at, because that's not my day to day business therefore I need, I'm happy to go away and do it, if someone hands me that reading no problem I'll do that but what I can't do is go and source it and find

U1: And sift through all the other

LA3: yeah, absolutely.

The role and remit for the critical colleagues (CC) was thus contested and gave rise to ambivalence. For the university members the CC role created tensions around the potential loss of influence over the participants in the work-based modules. Behind this was a concern that the CCs might usurp the role of the academic, thereby weakening the position of the university in the partnership and, more seriously, potentially jeopardizing its role as a provider of CPD in the longer term. For the LA members there was also uncertainty, in their case this concerned the appropriateness of the role in respect of schools or even its feasibility. Thus for both sides of the partnership the CC role had to be clearly demarcated from the academic tutor role, yet this proved undoable. Decision making, far from imposing closure, merely produced further uncertainty and complexity. Decision making is a key feature of emergent leadership within groups, yet it is not a 'rational' process. Indeed,

Schoeneborn (2022, 673) claims that 'rational decisions', those which in effect may be arrived at deductively, 'are not decisions at all'. In CCO theorizing, in particular the form influenced by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, the decision occupies a central yet paradoxical role in organization (Schoeneborn 2011). For Luhmann, decisions are undecidable: 'decisions can only be communicated if the rejected alternatives are also communicated' (Luhmann 2000, 64, quoted in Schoeneborn 2011, 11). The decision makes visible that there are alternatives while simultaneously communicating that there is no alternative, since that is what, by definition, a decision is. This paradoxical oscillation constitutes the fulcrum of organization which retrospective narration attempts to 'deparadoxify' and render 'rational'. In this case, retrospective narration did indeed attempt to erase the undecidability that surrounded the decisions made in framing workplace support. All WG members referred to the importance of this decision surrounding the nature of workplace support in their post-meeting emails, narrating this as a key moment in the project in which the naming of the critical colleague assumed symbolic importance. In effect this was the move which simultaneously located the learning in the workplace and ensured that the module did not become 'distance learning'. However, the undecidability of decision continued to haunt this construct lending it an ambivalence which pervaded the role and its enactment.

Particularized membership ties

Particularized membership ties concern the relationships formed within the group, the roles assumed by individuals, and especially the positions taken up by group members viz-a-viz one another. To the extent that all narratives of personal experience involve the positioning of self in relation to the other, all may be said to be concerned with identity. In the transcripts 'small stories', the everyday, ephemeral narratives arising from talk-in-interaction (Watson 2007), clearly positioned individuals within the group giving rise to both assertive and cooperative talk. In this example, during the first WG meeting, LA1 questioned a proposal to conduct an audit of CPD across partner authorities to get a sense of the extent to which a pool of staff might be available to provide in-school, work-based support:

LA1: I can quite clearly see how capacity in coaching and mentoring might be helpful information although I think it would be variable across the authority and because of

‘professional update’ [the system of re-accreditation of teachers with the General Teaching Council, see Watson and Fox 2015] we’ve got two pilot clusters, I’m actually doing that for the reviewers within the cluster as part of our preparation for professional update, so I will know within the two clusters that are pilots, what the capacity is. We’ve had coaching and mentoring training at various levels over a very long period of time and I think you know even, even, just to do a register of who had been trained would be almost impossible now. The CPD collection, I would need to know exactly why we’re doing that and how that would contribute this enterprise.

This questioning by the LA representative of a proposal put forward by the university members of the working group in the first meeting, was highly significant and referred to by everyone in their emails following the meeting. LA1’s assertive stance positions her as a major player in the WG, and is clearly about her own identity and position of seniority within the LA, and can therefore be said to be about the production of particularized membership ties.

Assertive talk thereby maintains heterogeneity within the group. Cooperative talk, on the other hand, produces a sense of ‘us’ as a group. A striking aspect of this sense of ‘we-ness’ was produced through laughter and banter. While little attention has been paid to this aspect of organizational communication it can be argued that this is a key feature in the production of a collective identity. Collective identity necessarily focuses on jointly produced storylines. On reading the transcript of the first WG meeting we were intrigued to see at the very end of the meeting, as we were all leaving, the transcriber had typed simply ‘muffin chat’. On returning to the audio-recording ‘muffin chat’, it transpired, referred to the following conversation (which we had, in truth, forgotten). To place this conversation in context, the refreshments provided for the meeting had included the standard University fare of chocolate chip muffins, not infrequently returned uneaten:

U1: feel free to take a muffin

LA1: you can’t get rid of these muffins at all, can you

U2: they weren’t as nice as they looked

LA1: you're not selling them

U1: muffins never are

LA2: there's something about a muffin

LA1: a muffin's never really a fairy cake is it - It might aspire to be a fairy cake

LA2: there's a philosophy in that

U1: that's the title of your first novel

LA1: *absolutely...*

U1: 'A muffin's never really a fairy cake'

LA3: a good title for a book

U3: [name] did I get your consent form?

LA1: or, if you want some baggage - my sister was a fairy cake but I was always a muffin...

(Watson 2015, 138)

There is a lot of overlapping of speech and not all is clear. The first point to note is that this exchange has nothing to do with the relative merits of bakery products, notwithstanding the current obsession with such matters on TV reality shows. The talk is excited and accompanied by gales of general laughter from the whole group. Laughter has been shown to produce positive affect in group situations (Gervais and Wilson 2005) and is therefore important in terms of developing social cohesion. This exchange, at the end of the first WG meeting, is key in terms of the emergence of collective identity. Inconsequential as it appears, this conversation effectively announced the arrival of the group, and laughter continued to be a very noticeable feature of meetings. As a narrative of emergent collective identity it serves both to unite the group and to position individuals within the group, again pointing up the heterogenous nature of collective identity. (Though laughter can also exclude, and tellingly the group member to whom U3, the WG convenor, addresses her

remark about consent forms did not join in and later withdrew from the WG, disappearing after the third meeting.)

Very little work has been carried out on the role of laughter and humour in partnership working across organizations. Sociologists have not, by and large, adopted the fine grained techniques of conversation analysts in elucidating the precise insertion of laughter into conversation in work contexts. An exception is the work of Kangasharju and Nikko (2009, 114) who suggest that joint laughter is a 'methodically produced and managed activity that does not occur randomly but is linked to activities that can be described as challenging'. Humour and laughter can therefore be used strategically in a number of ways as a resource to improve task performance and as 'an interpersonal emotion management technique used to strengthen bonds to the group' (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001, 126). Charman et al (2013, 153) go further, suggesting that humour and laughter may constitute a form of 'leadership'. They say 'humour, rather than perhaps the more traditional view of strong leadership, ironically provides the glue which more formal processes within inter-professional working have failed to do'. Though they do not go on to elaborate this statement it can be argued that it is in/through laughter as a form of communication that the group organizes itself and orientates to the task. Laughter therefore functions as a resource to be drawn on in IOC going beyond serving as a mechanism to establish and maintain positive affect within the group. Laughter may facilitate the jointly produced storylines which contribute to the development of particularized membership ties. In this way laughter becomes an integral aspect of the communicative constitution of organization which deserves greater attention.

Conclusion: implications for leadership

In this analysis we sought to examine the means by which interorganizational partnership is talked into being, drawing on a methodological framework informed by CCO and operationalised by means of a discursive framework provided by Hardy et al (2005). In this final section we examine this approach and consider the implications for the leadership of such partnerships. While CCO has focused largely on collaboration within organizations, Hardy et al's prime concern is with collaboration between organizations in which

participation cannot be enforced by means of hierarchy. A key consideration for IOC is therefore the development of collective identity. Hardy et al's schema hypothesises collective identity as arising in the production and complex interplay of generalized and particularized membership ties arising within conversations and centred around the production of texts (Cooren et al, 2011). In this way the group talks itself into being. A key task for the group is therefore to focus the work around one or more texts which supports the development of such membership ties and maintains the balance between common/private constructions and assertive/cooperative styles. In the case presented in this paper the programme configuration made up of ovals and squares functioned as a mediating instrument the meanings of which had to be thrashed out since a common understanding could not be assumed. In hindsight this facilitated exploration of the issues.

If this all sounds a little too neat, then it is important to reflect on some of the key features clearly evident in the data examined here and which experience tells us is a common feature of conversations and the making of decisions in groups. Hardy et al's framework, while undoubtedly useful, underplays the importance of the 'less than rational' in the production of collective identity, smoothing over and failing to notice the significance of the ambiguities and incoherences which pervade IOC. An important aspect of this surrounded decision making within the group which Luhmann regards as the key 'social event' of organizational communication (Schoeneborn 2011, 671). What is clearly revealed in these transcripts is the radically undecideable nature of decision making which always already sows the seeds of future uncertainties. If leadership is defined as influence within the IOC context around the making of decisions (though not the *announcing* of decisions, which remains within the purview of the designated 'leader')(Clifton 2009), then 'Decision making, or the sense making that permeates the talk around a decision, is an action in which all the team members are accountably able to participate' (61). This is the quality of decision making that links it to leadership understood as an emergent property. This is a key concern for school leaders engaged in working with others, at all levels of the education system, and is certainly relevant to the development of 'distributed leadership' (see, for example, Chapman and Muijs 2014). Laughter might indeed be the glue that holds the fragile edifice together. In the example set out here effective IOC, as defined by Hardy et al (2005) emerged despite, or maybe precisely in and through, the ambiguities, contradictions and the frequent

laughter that pervaded the discussions. We are not saying that every meeting should be serviced by inedible muffins, but it does suggest the need to strategically engage university catering services as a means to further partnership working.

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¹ Teaching in Scotland has for many years been an all-graduate profession but in recent times education policy, obsessed with all things Finnish, has supported the growth of masters-level learning for teachers, while stopping short of requiring teachers to be educated to masters level (Donaldson 2010).