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**Author(s):** Vähäsantanen, Katja; Paloniemi, Susanna; Hökkä, Päivi; Eteläpelto, Anneli

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# An agency-promoting learning arena for developing shared work practices<sup>1</sup>

Katja Vähäsantanen, Susanna Paloniemi, Päivi Hökkä & Anneli Eteläpelto

*Department of Education, University of Jyväskylä, Finland*

Despite the emerging recognition of the pivotal role played by professional agency within work contexts, little is known about how agency is promoted and enacted in organised work-related learning settings. This chapter focuses on the *work conference* as an orchestrated agency-promoting learning arena. We understand professional agency as a necessary precondition of work-related learning, and we emphasise the potential of work conferences to activate and promote such agency. Our empirical study investigated three work conferences in education and healthcare organisations in Finland. Utilising assessments, the investigation addressed how the participants perceived the conditions for learning and the learning outcomes in these conferences. The work conference was mostly viewed as a worthwhile learning arena. The conference advanced participants' professional agency and participation across entrenched professional boundaries, and work-related learning occurred at both individual and collective levels. A comparison of the three work conferences indicated that in terms of the generation and actualisation of innovative developmental discussions, the most prominent learning outcomes occurred when the participants were able to enact substantial professional agency, when there was comprehensive participation from the work community, and when boundary crossing occurred. This paper contributes to the understanding of the conditions that impede or support work-related learning.

**Keywords:** Professional agency; dialogical agency; work-related learning; boundary crossing; participation; work conference

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## 1 Introduction

In rapidly changing work environments, continuous learning is necessary not only for individual professionals, but also for work communities and organisations (Billett, 2011; Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014; Kira, 2010). Work organisations, such as those in education and healthcare, are increasingly expected not only to improve their work practices and structures in order to produce high-quality services, but also to be productive and innovative (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013, 2014; Messmann & Mulder, 2017, this volume). This expectation requires professionals to engage in learning that is transformative and innovative rather than merely reproductive (Alasoini, 2011; Tynjälä, 2013).

Although much individual and collective learning occurs within everyday work activities (Billett & Noble, 2017, this volume), the hectic and pressurised atmosphere of contemporary workplaces may impede innovative and effective workplace learning (e.g., Kira, 2010). Thus, there is an urgent need to organise venues for training and learning within workplaces. In such organised settings, it is vital to prompt and activate individuals' professional agency, because agency appears to be relevant to learning, for both individuals and work communities (Billett, 2011; Cairns & Malloch, 2011; Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Goller & Harteis, 2017, this volume; Imants, Wubbels, & Vermunt, 2013; Kerosuo, 2017, this volume; Philpott & Oates, 2017). When their professional agency is promoted, individuals can become agentic contributors who are able to express their opinions, ideas, and suggestions regarding their work practices. An agentic perspective on learning emphasises the responsibility of both individual and collective actors in learning processes, bearing in mind that taking such responsibility increases the actors' sense of ownership in learning (Cremers, Wals, Wesselink, & Mulder, 2016; Labone & Long, 2016; Lovett, Dempster, & Flückiger, 2015).

Since the role of professional agency is emphasised in work-related learning, it is also necessary to organise and investigate agency-promoting learning events. These events should also be seen as bound up with social interactions, because even from an agentic perspective, the social nature of learning cannot be ignored (Cairns & Malloch, 2011; Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Philpott & Oates, 2017). This chapter reports on an investigation of the *work conference* as an orchestrated agency-promoting learning arena. The aim of such conferences is, ultimately, to enhance the development of shared work practices within dialogical interactions (Kalliola & Nakari, 2007). We view that the work conference as an agency-promoting intervention has the

potential to trigger participants' professional agency; this agency is in turn the pivotal condition for work-related learning, which includes the development of work practices.

The chapter is based on assessments obtained from the participants in three work conferences. One of the conferences took place at a hospital, and the other two were organised at a university. We report on how the participants perceived the learning conditions and outcomes of the work conferences, and we compare the work conferences with each other as work-related learning arenas. In so doing, we explore work-related learning via two lenses: (a) what professionals learn (i.e., learning outcomes) and (b) the conditions that appear to enable learning (see, e.g., Eraut, 2011). Below, we present some theoretical considerations relating to these two aspects of work-related learning. This study focuses especially on professional agency and boundary crossing as pivotal conditions for learning. Overall, the chapter contributes to the current discussion by considering how professional agency and learning are intertwined. Further, our findings have some practical implications for how work organisations can support work-related learning.

## **2 Theoretical considerations regarding work-related learning**

### ***2.1 Individual and collective learning***

In recent research, work-related learning has been explored from different viewpoints. According to Cairns and Malloch (2011), learning involves change and development in individuals, groups, and work organisations. More precisely, learning is understood as acquiring knowledge, developing professional competencies, developing task performance, and changing behaviour and thinking (Eraut, 2011; Fenwick, 2008; Harteis & Goller, 2014). It also includes increased awareness and understanding – for example, of other people and of one's own organisation (Eraut, 2011; Tynjälä, 2013). Furthermore, learning is conceptualised as the individual and collective construction of (new or altered) meanings and creative innovations (Fenwick, 2008; Tynjälä, 2013) and as the formation and transformation of work practices and professional identities (Billett, 2011; Eteläpelto et al., 2014). At the collective level, professional identity negotiations include strengthened elements of shared identifications, memberships, togetherness, and a sense of belonging within professional groups and communities (Davey, 2013; Hökkä, Vähäsantanen, & Mahlakaarto, 2017).

The work conference can be viewed as an orchestrated work-related learning arena that aims to support the development of shared work practices. This implies that learning, and collective learning in particular, can occur in this context. However, individual learning can also be expected to emerge, because according to Messmann and Mulder (2011), fostering workplace innovations can also contribute to individual professionals' learning. Other scholars, too, have emphasised that varieties of learning at individual, community, and organisational levels should not be seen as separate entities; rather, there is a reciprocal relationship between various forms of learning (Fenwick, 2008; Imants et al., 2013; Messman & Mulder, 2017, this volume; Valleala, Herranen, Collin, & Paloniemi, 2015). Ideally, individual learning and organisational development would go hand in hand, and there would be orchestrated events for fostering sustainable learning in work organisations (Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014; Labone & Long, 2016; Vähäsantanen, 2015).

There has been considerable discussion of how work-related learning processes can emerge and be promoted. Recent studies have emphasised that learning occurs especially via working and collaboration in the context of social interaction and via sharing experiences and reflecting on work practices (Cremers et al., 2016; Goller & Billett, 2014; Kira, 2010; Tynjälä, 2013). In addition, recent literature has emphasised the role of professional agency and boundary crossing in work-related learning. Utilising these promising theoretical insights into (orchestrating) work-related learning, the sections below focus on the role of professional agency and boundary-crossing participation in individual and collective learning.

## ***2.2 Professional agency as a part of learning***

Although recent studies have emphasised the crucial role of professional agency in work-related learning, they have conceptualised agency differently. Some scholars understand professional agency as a capacity or disposition that enables individuals to make intentional choices and to initiate actions based on them (Goller & Harteis, 2017, this volume; Harteis & Goller, 2014). In addition, professional agency has been understood as constituted by individual actions – including influencing, making choices, and taking stances – in ways that make a significant difference to work practices and professional identity (Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Toom, Pyhältö, & Rust, 2015; Ylén, 2017, this volume). In dialogical practices, agency is enacted particularly

through expressing experiences and opinions, proposing and evaluating ideas and initiatives, and making suggestions relative to a given frame of action (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Valleala et al., 2015). In this paper, we take a subject-centred socio-cultural approach to professional agency (Eteläpelto, 2017, this volume; Eteläpelto et al., 2013) and conceptualise professional agency mainly as a matter of influencing, making choices, expressing ideas and suggestions, and taking stances regarding work-related matters, such as individual and collective work practices.

In the workplace, the most proactive forms of agency are enacted via creative initiatives and innovative suggestions for developing work practices, creating new work operations, and transforming the course of activities (Engeström, 2011; Harteis & Goller, 2014; Philpott & Oates, 2017; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Virkkunen (2006) used the term “transformative agency” to refer to the ability and actions of individuals and groups to transform their work practices. It should always be noted that agency is both an individual and a collective phenomenon (Collin et al., 2017, this volume; Hökkä, Vähäsantanen, & Mahlakaarto, 2017). Indeed, individual and collective agency can be seen as intertwined phenomena. Even though an initial expression of agency might come from an individual, collective activities and interaction are needed to sustain the measure over time (Haapasaari & Kerosuo, 2015).

Because manifestations of professional agency are at the heart of work-related learning, there is a need to orchestrate learning forums that can advance the enactment of professional agency. Both individual backgrounds (e.g., professional interests and competencies) and workplace conditions (e.g., workplace and management culture) should be harnessed to advance agency, which can then enable learning (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Harteis & Goller, 2014; Toom et al., 2015). Thus, familiar social relationships and positive work experiences may be drawn upon to promote agentic activities for professional learning (Vähäsantanen, 2015). In a similar vein, Goller and Billett (2014) argued that the agentic utilisation and crafting of experiences are crucial for successful professional learning, and Philpott and Oates (2017) suggested that professional communities and dialogical practices serve as affordances for professional agency in learning (see also Ylén, 2017, this volume). Conversely, traditional power-based professional relationships can obstruct the enactment of professional agency in learning and working contexts (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011; Paloniemi & Collin, 2012).

In this study, we take a subject-centred socio-cultural approach to professional agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013, 2014). Thus, we view individual resources and social conditions as framing the enactment of professional agency, and we understand agency and structure as distinct but mutually constitutive phenomena. Instead of taking the viewpoint that agency is determined solely by social structures and conditions, we maintain that professional agency is embedded with and practiced actively through the social conditions of work (see also Evans, 2017, this volume) and that the individual has an active role in constructing and modifying the social conditions and practices in the workplace.

### ***2.3 Boundary-crossing participation in learning processes***

A number of scholars have discussed the pivotal importance of boundary-crossing participation for work-related learning. Fuller and Unwin (2011) emphasised that work organisations as learning environments can vary in terms of how they enable the participation of individuals in different work communities, such as teams or units. Learning at work, and the integration of personal and organisational learning, is fostered by an expansive learning environment (i.e., one that enables participation in different communities) as opposed to a restrictive environment. In line with this notion, certain studies have strongly emphasised the importance of crossing professional and organisational boundaries for transformative learning (Heiskanen & Heiskanen, 2011; Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014; Tynjälä, 2013). At its best, boundary crossing involves gaining an understanding of other's perspectives and experiences in such a way that one's own practices and perspectives are transformed, which in turn results in the construction of knowledge (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Similarly, Kira (2010) suggested that to promote regenerative learning, it is essential to organise meetings between employees across different professional units and groups in the work organisation.

In a similar vein, Alasoini (2011) emphasised that workplace innovation requires a dialogue-oriented approach. Such an approach includes the genuine participation of various professional groups (management and personnel) from work organisations. It requires professionals to be prepared to listen to each other and to be able to express their opinions in dialogue. Haapasaari and Kerosuo (2015), too, emphasised that the sustainability of innovations requires the participation of all parties in the work organisation, such that all participants have

opportunities to communicate, to express their needs and concerns, and to put forward suggestions for solutions. These perspectives imply that both professional agency (understood in terms of expressing concerns and opinions and making suggestions) and participation across boundaries (including hierarchical ones) are intertwined with learning in work contexts (see also Virkkunen, 2006).

#### ***2.4 Overview of the theoretical concept and outlines for empirical research***

This study focuses on the work conference as a venue for work-related learning. We understand learning not only as the development of work practices at individual and collective levels, but also as the development of individuals' professional identities, knowledge, and behaviour. As described in the sections above, professional agency and boundary-crossing participation is crucial for both individual and collective learning. Thus, in order to foster professional learning and achieve fruitful learning outcomes, it is vital to provide affordances for the enactment of professional agency and participation across different boundaries and actors in work communities and organisations. It appears to be essential to orchestrate the social events that create such affordances, because it is not self-evident that professional agency and boundary-crossing participation are enabled in work and learning contexts in the absence of such events (Heiskanen & Heiskanen, 2011; Hökkä, Vähäsantanen, Paloniemi, & Eteläpelto, 2017, this volume; Kira, 2010; Virkkunen, 2006).

In the next section, we provide an introductory discussion of the work conference, which we view as an agency-promoting learning venue with the potential to advance boundary crossing between people from different professional groups and hierarchical positions. In this study, we expect that on one hand, professional agency can be promoted and triggered by the work conference, and on the other hand, the work conference's learning processes and outcomes result from the enactment of agency by the participants.

### **3 The work conference as a research context**

The work conference is a traditional method (used especially in Scandinavia) that aims to create a democratic dialogue for developing workplaces (Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986). At their best, work conferences can offer a shared and interactive learning arena in which participants can



reflect on their past experiences and build a future vision of their work and organisation (Kalliola & Nakari, 2007).

The work conference aims to achieve an equal and democratic dialogue via specific ground rules, which are introduced as guidelines for interaction (Gustavsen & Engelstad, 1986). These include valuing the work experience of each staff member and grounding the dialogue on the principle of reciprocal communication. The rules function as a facilitating measure, enabling all the participants to have an active voice and to be recognised in the interaction (Kalliola & Nakari, 2007). The rules are thus intended to create dialogues in which all the members of work communities, from different professions and hierarchical positions, can be valued agents in the development of shared work practices. Overall, the work conference embodies a dialogue-oriented approach, according to which the participants are prepared to listen genuinely to each other and have the opportunity to express their viewpoints, critically analyse their work practices, and generate solutions via mutual discussions (Alasoini, 2011). It is thus ideally a method for learning from others while enacting one's own professional agency. Professional agency receives particularly strong support from equal and democratic dialogue in the work conference, because unequal power relations can constrain professional agency.

For the purposes of planning and implementing each conference, a representative steering group was established. The steering group members represented all the stakeholders and hierarchical levels in question (i.e., employees and leaders, all professional groups). In the planning phase, the steering group agreed on the theme of the work conference. After the conference, the main task of the steering group was to take responsibility for implementing the action plans that were produced as outcomes of the conference. Accordingly, the steering group acts as a representative of and advocate for all the participants when the decisions are implemented in daily work practices after the work conference. At its best, the steering group builds bridges between conference outcomes and daily work practices, and in this way it becomes one of the factors that ensure the implementation of new ideas and initiatives in the structures of daily work.

The basic model of the work conference involves an interplay between small-group sessions and plenaries. The model includes four small-group sessions: (a) working on a vision related to the theme in homogeneous groups (i.e., professional groups), (b) working on obstacles to implementation of the vision in diagonal groups (i.e., multiprofessional groups),

(c) working on ways to solve the problems in voluntary groups, and (d) creating concrete action plans in natural groups (i.e., employees who work closely together). After each small-group session, the group's outputs are presented in a plenary session. The final plenary discussion is aimed at producing a summary of the ideas put forward, noting the similarities and the differences in the experiences and looking for common ground on the basis of which concrete actions can be taken (Kalliola & Nakari, 2007). In particular, working in and moving between the various small groups enables and supports boundary crossing between different professionals as well as between leaders and employees.

In this study, the two work conferences conducted at a university (involving two separate units) consisted of three small-group sessions (hence integrating the basic model's second and third phases), each followed by a plenary (Figure 1). Both work conferences lasted seven hours in total and focused on developing a vision for a desirable unit.

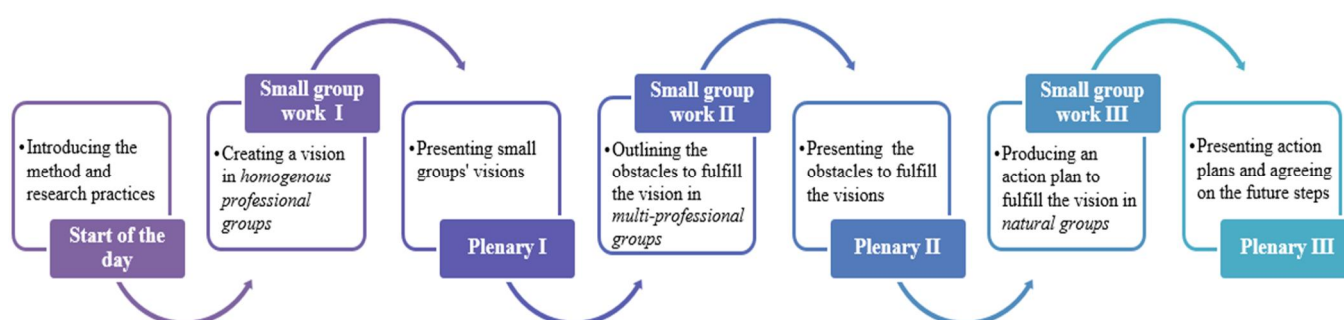


Figure 1. The revised model of the work conference.

Five hours were allocated for the work conference at the hospital, so it included only two small-group sessions. The conference theme was developing patient-centredness and common rules for professionals' shared working. In the first, the vision for this theme was considered in homogeneous professional groups (i.e., in groups consisting of secretaries, nurses, doctors, and nursing administrative leaders). The second small-group session focused on the obstacles and action plans in natural working groups. Both small-group sessions were followed by a plenary.

## **4 Research questions**

To gain a full understanding of work-related learning in the context of the work conference, we developed two research questions: (a) How did the participants perceive the conditions for learning, and how did they perceive the immediate and short-term learning outcomes of the work conference? (b) What were the relevant similarities and differences between the three work conferences regarding their learning conditions and outcomes? Because scholars view professional agency and boundary crossing as pivotal conditions for learning, we investigated these phenomena under the first research question.

## **5 Methods**

### ***5.1 Participants and data collection***

The three work conferences took place in 2013. The participants (92 in total) were from either a single Finnish university or a Finnish healthcare organisation. Specifically, there were 42 participants from a particular university department (academics, administrative personnel, and leaders), 23 participants from the university's administrative unit (administrative personnel and leaders), and 27 participants from the hospital (nurses, doctors, secretaries, and nursing administrative leaders). As a research data, we utilised written assessments collected immediately (i.e., at the end of the conference) and collected via email follow-up a few weeks later.

The immediate assessments (Data 1) included open-ended questions, as follows: (a) What did you think of the contents of the development day? (b) What did you think of the work conference as a developmental method? What worked, and what didn't? (c) Did you get a chance to present your own views, and was the interaction different from what you are used to in your work community? If so, how? (d) Do you have ideas about how to continue the development work? What topics should be covered? Overall, 71 participants (77%) completed these assessments. There were 30 respondents (71.5%) from the university department, 20 respondents (87%) from the university administrative unit, and 21 respondents (77.8%) from the hospital.

As a follow-up, we utilised assessments (Data 2) collected approximately three weeks after the work conferences. The data were collected via an electronic questionnaire and were

based on the following open-ended questions: (a) What kinds of ideas did you get from the work conference in relation to your work? (b) What ideas have you put into practice in your own work since the work conference? (c) What ideas have been put into practice in your work unit? Overall, 41 (45%) of the original participants completed these assessments. There were 11 respondents (26.2%) from the university department, 16 respondents (69.5%) from the university administrative unit, and 14 respondents (51.9%) from the hospital.

## ***5.2 Data analysis***

The data were analysed via qualitative and quantitative content analysis (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), following three phases. In the first phase of the data analysis, we utilised the immediate assessments (Data 1) in an attempt to answer the first research question. As a first step, the data were transferred to the Atlas.ti program. Applying theoretical notions, the learning conditions were analysed in terms of professional agency and boundary-crossing participation. We started the data analysis by reading through the data word by word in order to achieve an understanding of the contents. We highlighted and extracted those parts of the data that captured key statements and expressions related to the research question. Afterwards, we reread all these parts and coded the expressions on a one-by-one basis. In this process (which was carried out collectively), similar expressions were marked with similar codes. Thereafter, codes with similar expressions were grouped into the same category. Finally, we organised the derived categories into a smaller number of main categories and calculated frequencies for the categories. We then identified some relevant patterns among the categories, based on the respondents' interpretations.

In the second phase of the data analysis, due to the content of the data, the follow-up assessments (Data 2) were used to investigate learning outcomes. In this phase, we utilised two categories (regeneration of the work community and individual learning) that had been generated in the first phase of the data analysis. We grouped respondents' expressions into these categories and counted the frequencies for each category. Below, the findings from the two data sets are reported together, but we do indicate the data set from which the findings emerged.

The third phase of the analysis focused on the second research question, which involves a comparison of the three conferences. This analysis was conducted by applying "thick

description” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), based on the categories obtained from the two previous analytical phases. As an outcome of the analysis, we created three short descriptions that included the typical features and illustrations relating to each conference in order to cover their main learning conditions and outcomes. The following sections present our main findings in the light of the research questions.

## 6 The learning conditions and outcomes of the work conferences

The analysis for the first research question resulted in a hierarchy of categories related to learning conditions and outcomes, along with their frequencies (Table 1). These findings are described in more detail in the following sections. The first two sections illuminate the participants’ perceptions of the conditions for learning in the work conferences. The sections then illustrate how the learning outcomes were reported concerning discussions to develop work practices, regeneration of the work community, and individual learning.

Table 1.

*Learning conditions and learning outcomes in work conferences ( $n_1$  = number of respondents in immediate data ( $N = 71$ );  $n_2$  = number of respondents in follow-up data ( $N = 41$ )).*

<b>Learning conditions</b>	<b><i>Professional agency in dialogue</i></b>
	Enacted agency ( $n_1 = 64$ )
	Restricted agency ( $n_1 = 9$ )
	<b><i>Multivoiced participation</i></b>
	Boundary-crossing participation ( $n_1 = 31$ )
	Limited participation from the work community ( $n_1 = 9$ )
<b>Learning outcomes</b>	<b><i>Developmental discussions regarding work practices</i></b>
	Innovative discussion ( $n_1 = 26$ )
	Repetitive discussion ( $n_1 = 18$ )
	Elaborative discussion ( $n_1 = 21$ )
	<b><i>Regeneration of the work community</i></b> ( $n_1 = 6$ ; $n_2 = 28$ )
<b><i>Individual learning</i></b> ( $n_1 = 9$ ; $n_2 = 19$ )	

### ***6.1 Professional agency in dialogue***

Regarding learning conditions, the participants' perceptions of the work conference were mostly positive. According to 64 respondents (90.2%), the work conference was successful in terms of enabling *enacted professional agency in dialogue*. Enacted agency was manifested as expressing and presenting one's own ideas, opinions, and viewpoints and as taking stances on the issues discussed. Furthermore, the respondents reported experiences of being heard and taken seriously: they found that their views were taken into account and that people did not ignore each other. As one participant from the hospital put it: "There was a democratic way of working. Everyone got their voice heard." As well as indicating their own agency, respondents said that other participants' agency also emerged, including the agency of persons who were not usually on the front lines of discussions in their work communities:

"I was able to express my ideas. Those who don't make their voices heard in everyday work were also able to speak." (University administrative unit)

The findings also indicated that professional agency was well supported, especially in the small-group work, as illustrated by a comment of an administrative employee: "I was allowed to speak more than I usually do in my work community, because it is easier in small groups, and at the same time, small-group work forces you to be active." Due to the democratic rules, some respondents also put extra effort into creating space for the participation of other, more silent members. Moreover, the familiar content of the work conference, and its close connection to daily work, encouraged the enactment of agency by all members of the work community:

"The content of the discussion was close to the everyday work, which made participation easy. Everyone can take stances on practical issues, and it is nice that you can say silly things as well." (University administrative unit)

Although most of the respondents saw the conference as an agentic learning arena, nine of them (12.7%) reported *restricted professional agency* during the work conference. This was described in terms of a lack of opportunities for exerting an influence and expressing one's opinion. From the point of view of agency, the plenaries in particular were viewed negatively. They were described as nondialogical and nonagentic, in that the interactions conformed to the hierarchical relations of the work community and failed to provide sufficient support for all members to take an active role. Thus, in the plenaries, hierarchical power relations and

traditional roles were prominent rather than overcome. Furthermore, some respondents mentioned that small-group interactions were dominated by particular members.

### ***6.2 Multivoiced participation***

The findings indicated a variety of perspectives on multivoiced participation in the work conferences. First of all, 31 respondents (43.7%) reported that *boundary-crossing participation* was possible during the work conference. Small-group sessions were experienced as workable, and several respondents valued small-group work with colleagues with whom they did not frequently collaborate in their daily work. In this sense, the conference made it possible to work in multiprofessional small groups that crossed traditional professional boundaries. In the case of the university department, boundary crossing occurred particularly between representatives from different subject-groups on the one hand and administration on the other. In the hospital, multivoicedness took the form of multiprofessional discussions between leaders, doctors, nurses, and secretaries. In this way, the conference made it possible to break down rigid professional boundaries. Furthermore, within this process, the vision of the work community's future was enriched via an unusually broad interaction between different perspectives and experiences, as illustrated in the following extract:

“There was valuable discussion and reflection on shared issues. Many professional groups and viewpoints were presented, which was exceptional.”  
(Hospital)

However, nine respondents (12.7%) reported *limited participation from the work community*, because only a proportion of the work community's personnel had participated in the work conference. It was observed that only the most active colleagues had taken part in the conference, that is, the people who usually participated in developmental days. Hence, the staff was only partially represented, leading to doubts concerning the emergence of multivoiced discussion. There was also suspicion that the absentees could obstruct implementation of the developmental suggestions. This was especially the case when powerful personalities were absent from the conference, as highlighted by a participant from the hospital: “There emerged good ideas, which will stay within these walls. Daily work will continue as usual, since not all the people in the work community were here. Dominant people were absent.”

### ***6.3 Developmental discussions regarding work practices***

The developmental discussions that emerged in the work conference were generally perceived as interesting and useful. However, the discussions were found to differ considerably in terms of their nature. According to the respondents, the developmental discussions were (a) innovative, (b) repetitive, or (c) elaborative.

Altogether, 26 respondents (36.6%) perceived the work conference as an arena for *innovative developmental discussion*. Thus, it was emphasised the shared opportunity to give voice to new ideas and differing viewpoints, to create new visions, to envisage new working patterns, to make concrete suggestions, and to arrive at novel solutions for the development of shared work practices. The enabled agency of all participants, and the situation of generally working together, seemed to provide a basis for innovative discussion:

“It was a good method that enabled the natural participation of everyone. Genuine developmental challenges came up, and we quite quickly found workable pathways towards solutions.” (University administrative unit)

Innovative developmental discussion was further facilitated by the boundary crossing that emerged in the conference. As one respondent from the university department put it: “Changing small groups around worked well; boundary crossing between the subject-groups did occur, and ideas were developed and expanded beyond small circles of people.”

However, 18 respondents (25.3%) noticed that the conference included *repetitive developmental discussion* of work practices. As they saw it, even though the discussion was lively and important, the problem was that the same old, familiar topics were discussed, with familiar suggestions for reforming work practices. This was seen as due to the fact that the same persons regularly participate in developmental processes, as one participant from the university department noted: “Nothing radically new came up, but this was probably because it is mostly the same people who participate in developmental days.” Thus, limited participation from the work community appeared to hinder the creation of innovative ideas.

For 21 of the respondents (29.6%), the work conference seemed to create a space for *elaborative developmental discussion*. This means that the conference made it possible to reflect on, discuss, and highlight various shared topics in a concrete fashion and in terms of the



organisation's mission and core tasks. The conference was seen as an arena for hearing ideas and for sharing knowledge with colleagues. This applied particularly to the small groups.

Overall, several developmental suggestions were made in the work conferences. For example, in the hospital conference, action plans were derived for promoting patient-centred care. These encompassed the flow of information between professional groups, collaboration within the work community, and the support given to staff and the responsibilities that management needed to be engaged (Collin, Paloniemi, & Vähäsantanen, 2015). The main responsibility for the implementation of the developmental suggestions was allocated to the steering groups of the work conferences. In considering the outcomes, the respondents shared a concern that these should be genuinely implemented in the work community. They also feared that this would not occur.

#### ***6.4 Regeneration of the work community***

In the immediate data, six respondents (8.5%) reported that the work conference had provided opportunities for getting to know the members of the work community in a new way. During the work conference, they perceived an awakened sense of togetherness that resulted from engaging in discussions in the small groups and getting to know each other. As one respondent from the university administrative unit wrote: "These kinds of shared meetings increase the sense of togetherness." That is, participants' professional identity at the collective level seemed to be strengthened.

Similarly, the follow-up assessments revealed changes in the work communities. According to 28 respondents (68.3%), the work conference brought the members of the work community closer to each other, made the community more close-knit, strengthened the shared understanding of developmental pathways, and increased (formal and informal) collaboration within the work community. Many respondents emphasised that they themselves had been active in the processes of bringing the desired changes to their work community:

"We have started to meet up with people doing similar work from different units, because the leaders haven't made any initiative for breaking down organisational boundaries, and they don't actually think that this kind of breakage is needed." (University administrative unit)

In fact, the developmental suggestions created during the conference had already been implemented in the work community to some extent – for example, as elements in curriculum development and in the development of the work culture. As a consequence of the conference, there had also been more shared discussion and shared decision making, in one instance regarding the division of work in the work community. Other measures included creating practices for making initiatives, for giving feedback, and for constructing web pages in order to share information internally. However, not all the respondents saw real changes as having followed from the conference. As one respondent put it: “The day was well organised, and being heard had an empowering effect. However, no concrete changes have taken place so far, at least not from my perspective.” (University department).

### **6.5 Individual learning**

The findings that emerged from the immediate data revealed that *individual learning* occurred in terms of the participants’ thinking and acting. Nine respondents (12.7%) indicated that they gained a new understanding of their work and the work community from hearing the voices of their colleagues:

“It was an important day, because this is the way to hear what others think and how they see things from different viewpoints, things that are so obvious to oneself.” (University department)

Furthermore, some respondents perceived that they learned a new developmental method, whereas others said the work conference offered an empowering environment; thus, in a sense, it served as a work counselling session.

Altogether, 19 respondents (46.2%) in the follow-up data indicated individual learning outcomes from the conference. First of all, they had gained a better picture of their own possibilities to influence and work in their work community. This included the understanding that they were encouraged to experiment with all aspects of their work. In addition, they had constructed a more elaborate understanding of their agentic role in the work community. This was due to increased togetherness, and because the conference had encouraged them to act differently within the work community. One respondent from the university department described becoming a more agentic member in the work community:

“Now I present my stances more courageously. I also feel that my opinions and acts are important, and have a meaning. I complain less and try to do more. In particular, I express my opinions concerning actions and procedures.”

The work conference also clarified respondents’ understanding of their work as part of the work community, and it offered ideas for developing personal work practices. New ideas and practices also emerged regarding new ways of supporting, listening to, and taking colleagues into account in the context of daily work. As one respondent from the hospital put it: “I understood that it is valuable to listen to different professional groups – each group has a slightly different perspective on matters.”

## **7 Comparison of the work conferences as work-related learning arenas**

The working principles of the conferences were similar, despite some differences in duration and structure. The enactment of professional agency was highlighted by the respondents from all the work conferences. Furthermore, the respondents reported boundary-crossing participation fairly equally, though with rather more emphasis in the hospital context and in the university administrative unit. However, there were some differences in the learning conditions and outcomes, as reported below.

*The university department.* This work conference focused on building a vision for the department over a five-year time frame. The respondents consisted of teachers, researchers, administrative personnel, and their leaders. For most of the respondents, the work conference facilitated their professional agency in dialogue, even if as compared to the other work conferences the personnel of the university department mostly reported restrictions in their agency. They were also the people most likely to note the limited participation of the wider work community and to describe the developmental discussions of the conference as repetitive. They were thus more likely to see the day as merely a continuation of old and repetitive discussions with familiar colleagues. This aspect was perceived as a possible obstacle to the generation and actualisation of innovative developmental suggestions. Most of the learning outcomes reported here related to individual learning.

*The hospital.* The work conference for nurses, doctors, nursing administration, and secretaries focused on patient-centredness and common rules in the work community. The

respondents notably emphasised boundary-crossing participation as a valuable activity. The work done in the changing small groups offered a new learning arena for collaboration with other professionals. The work conference thus seemed to offer a new kind of venue for all the professionals, allowing them to learn from each other's viewpoints – as well as enabling them to share their personal viewpoints with others. However, only some respondents reported individual learning. The developmental discussion was mostly seen as elaborative, although some concrete suggestions were also presented. The success of the conference was questioned by some respondents, because the developmental suggestions were not subsequently implemented in the work community.

*The university administrative unit.* Administrative personnel and their leaders worked on the vision of their dream unit during their conference. As compared to participants in the other conferences, they gave fewer accounts of restricted agency. Furthermore, they were more likely to report significantly enabled professional agency and did not report limited participation from their work community. These findings suggest that comprehensive participation and substantial agency emerged mostly within the dialogue of the administrative unit. Furthermore, as compared to participants in other conferences, they mostly viewed their developmental discussions as innovative. Thus, in addition to individual learning outcomes, these respondents emphasised that there had been novel shared ideas and concrete suggestions for the development of the work community. This was further supported by the follow-up data: all the respondents reported that the conference had exerted positive effects on the remaking of the work community and that many suggestions had already been implemented.

## **8 Discussion and conclusions**

Overall, the work conferences, which we conceptualised as agency-promoting interventions, emerged as worthwhile work-related learning arenas. The participants' perceptions of the conferences were mostly positive regarding learning conditions, with the conferences being viewed as enabling their professional agency and participation across entrenched professional boundaries. We can conclude that learning occurred at both individual and collective levels (Eraut, 2011; Tynjälä, 2013). For example, on one hand, learning involved becoming a more agentic member in the work community, and on the other hand, it involved the formation of innovative developmental discussions and an increased sense of togetherness (i.e., strengthened

professional identity at the collective level). Thus, the claim (Messmann & Mulder, 2011, 2017, this volume) that individual learning can occur simultaneously with the broader development of the work community is supported, which indicates a close relationship between individual and collective learning (Billett, 2011; Valleala et al., 2015). Below, we offer some theoretical and practical conclusions and suggest avenues for future research.

A number of scholars have emphasised the pivotal contribution of professional agency to professional learning (Billett, 2011; Eteläpelto et al., 2014; Harteis & Goller, 2014; Vähäsantanen, 2015). From the point of view of the relationship between professional agency and learning, we suggest that agency supports work-related learning and is in a sense a central condition for learning processes. If people cannot be active agents with the opportunities to present their opinions and suggestions concerning shared work practices, it cannot be assumed that sustainable work-related learning will occur. In the context of dialogue, all the work conferences appeared to promote participants' agency in terms of expressing ideas, opinions, and viewpoints, as well as in terms of taking stances on shared work practices. In this sense, we can suggest that *dialogical agency* emerged.

The findings showed differences between the work conferences with respect to the nature (innovative, repetitive, or elaborative) of the developmental discussions and the extent of work-community regeneration. As a consequence of the work conference, some real transformations also emerged in work practices. These changes seemed to occur through the activities of participants and not through those of the steering groups – even if, according to the principle of the work conference, these groups had the responsibility of implementing changes based on the suggestions made. Hence, agentic grassroots efforts may be more effective in bringing about change than official channels. This emphasises the pivotal role of professional agency in work-related learning.

Thus far, we have discussed the role of professional agency in learning. The findings also revealed the role of participation in work-related learning. Boundary-crossing participation made possible the exchange and comparison of different perspectives and enabled people to learn from each other. In some cases, this paved the way for both individual learning and innovative discussions concerning the development of shared work practices. This study confirms the overall importance of boundary crossing for professional learning (Alasoini, 2011; Kira, 2010; Fuller & Unwin, 2011). Furthermore, the study indicates that comprehensive

participation (as opposed to limited participation) from the work community is needed for innovative developmental discussions. Such discussions, followed by actual regeneration of work communities, emerged primarily in the university administrative unit's work conference. Here, the participants reported reasonably comprehensive attendance from the work community, along with substantially enabled agency and a high degree of boundary crossing. By contrast, limited attendance from the work community (as reported in the university department's conference) seemed to limit the emergence and implementation of innovative discussion. Instead, what emerged was more of the nature of the repetitive developmental discussions.

Putting all these findings together, our main argument is that in efforts to understand and foster learning, one must take into account professional agency, boundary crossing, and comprehensive participation from the work communities in question. In this study, the importance of comprehensive participation derived from its relative absence in the work conferences. The findings further indicated that small-group work in particular, with varying participants, enabled both the enactment of professional agency and the crossing of professional boundaries. This illustrates the point that professional agency can be promoted by means of specific social practices. All in all, the social context and its resources are important for professional agency and for professional learning – even if we must always bear in mind that the ways in which individuals act and interact is central to learning (Billett, 2004, 2011; Labone & Long, 2016).

Despite the positive aspects of the work conferences, the participants' fear of inadequate implementation of the developmental suggestions turned out to be partly justified. Regarding the development of organisations and their practices, a crucial question is how to maintain the dynamic processes of change. Indeed, this and many other studies (e.g., Haapasaari & Kerosuo, 2015) have stressed the difficulty of putting good ideas into practice and maintaining a developmental atmosphere in organisations. In the case of the implementation of innovative ideas, it is vital to create a clear and long-term strategy for generating and monitoring activities (Kalliola & Nakari, 2007; Messman & Mulder, 2011).

Regarding the work conference as a method, we emphasise that more effort is required in the orchestration of the conference, so that participants are committed to the developmental work not only in the work conference but after it as well. This involves efforts to achieve

comprehensive participation from the work community and to encourage and authorise people take responsibility for implementing ideas and taking subsequent actions. Thus, responsibility should be given to the staff as a whole – as active crafters of their work practices – rather than delegated entirely to a steering group. This kind of development regarding the work conference is needed, because in its current form it supports participants' agency during the conference but not truly after it.

The findings showed that the specific structure and practices of the work conference gave rise to an agency-promoting learning arena. The findings also revealed that the work conference partly resourced participants' agency outside the conference, not only within it. Consequently, some participants felt empowered to more actively express their opinions and stances in their work communities. Hence, the agency-promoting effect might also hold after the work conference is finished. However, because professional agency is always embedded with and enacted through social conditions, if we want to strengthen professionals' agency beyond work-related interventions, we also need to create agency-promoting structures in actual workplaces (see also Ylén, 2017, this volume).

In work contexts, one candidate for enhancing individuals' professional agency and for further constructive organisational transformations is *agency-promoting leadership* (Hökkä, Rautiainen, Silander, & Eteläpelto, 2017; Hökkä & Vähäsantanen, 2014). Such leadership provides strong support for employees' professional agency. Leaders are encouraged to promote collaboration, interaction, and relationships; the emphasis is thus on people rather than managerial practices. In interactions based on such a principle, professionals can come together to express their perspectives, and to offer suggestions regarding the work practices of their organisation. Through shared dialogue, they can also create shared knowledge across the boundaries of professions and work communities.

Despite the limitations of the study (which include the size of the data and the relatively low response rate from the respondents in the follow-up electronic questionnaire), the findings revealed respondents' immediate perceptions and provided some valuable information about learning conditions and outcomes of the work conference. A longitudinal ethnographic approach would make it possible to study the implementation of developmental suggestions over time, the longer-term learning outcomes, and the overall importance of the conference for the participants' work and work communities. We also emphasise the need for further evidence

on the relationship between professional agency and learning. Although many studies have offered propositions regarding agentic efforts towards work-related learning, a stronger empirical foundation still needs to be built.

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