

## On the Spot Language Methodology: The Teacher Educator as a Metaphorical Flame<sup>1</sup>

Since 2002, several different pilot projects on teacher education inside the school have been initiated and subsidized by the Dutch government. These pilot projects involve large-scale collaborative projects. Longitudinal research studies have been carried out in order to determine the value of these projects (see e.g. Vandyck et al., 2009). In my research, however, I decided to explore a small-scale collaborative education project conceived and carried out in the workplace by both teachers and student teachers.

### Personal Motives and Expectations

In August 2007 I had been working as an educator and a methodologist at Utrecht University for six years. I felt that I was beginning to lose touch with the practical knowledge as a teacher of French I had acquired earlier. Moreover, I wanted to try out the methodological knowledge that I had obtained at the university on the spot.

As a methodologist, I aimed at achieving a better connection between the methodological theory and the practice of the student teacher. In addition I felt that I knew too little about the teachers' expertise. Moreover, I felt I had too few contact hours to share the love and enthusiasm for the subject with the teachers and the student teachers.

As a result, I decided to start a project at a secondary school aimed at the professional development of language teachers and their student teachers. This project was called *Language methodology on the spot*. At first I took on a double role. I replaced a secondary teacher for one year at my former school, where I had worked for ten years. In 2007 I was both a teacher at the school and a methodologist from Utrecht University. My hypothesis was that if student teachers received extra support on methodology, it would give them more insight into what it is like to be a communicative language teacher within the context of their own school. The goal of second language education within the communicative approach is that learners become fluent second language users (Moonen, 2008). Consequently, the student teachers would acquire their methodological skills on the spot in order to integrate theory and practice.

I decided to cover the same subjects at the school as were treated at the institute during the same period. I expected that this integration was leading to more meaningful learning than in the regular situation, when students receive theories, develop lessons and try to carry them out in their particular school's day-to-day practice.

I had no such clear expectations regarding the value for the experienced teachers. At first I thought that their reasons for participation stemmed from the collaborative contacts we had had in the past. I was not sure what I could offer them

as a language methodologist. I felt especially uncertain about my expertise as a teacher educator on the spot. I needed to examine the questions articulated by Whitehead (1998): How do I improve my practice (in a new context)? How do I help my students to improve the quality of their learning? Moreover how do I transform a group of individuals into a learning community (Dooner, et al, 2007)?

### Practice

In practice, the project *Language methodology on the spot* turned out to be slightly different than expected. The group consisted of two experienced foreign-language teachers; four student teachers of German, English and French; an academic researcher; and me. At the university I was tutor of two of the student teachers and methodologist of all four. The language teachers were my colleagues of French and of English. Together we convened to design a number of foreign language lessons, taught those lessons, and evaluated them in the following meetings.

From the summer holiday until the Christmas break, the student teachers, the academic researcher, and I met every week for one hour. The academic researcher was present at the meetings to collect data for her own research project about the development of social competences in such a community. She didn't participate in the self-study. The two teachers attended seven of these meetings. I was in charge of the meetings in the weeks before the autumn break and decided to cover the same subjects as were discussed at the teacher training institute during the same weeks. After the autumn break, I decided to follow the academic researcher's advice and I asked the student teachers to take turns chairing a session. We hoped that in this way the students became more responsible for their own learning process. Now it was the students who chose which subjects to discuss. The teachers gave advice. After Christmas, the project was evaluated by means of a questionnaire. Subsequently the group continued to meet once a month. We prepared a language day in May for all the foreign language student teachers of the University of Utrecht, university language methodologists, and the other participants of the project.

### Self-Study Research

When these half term evaluations showed all participants were very enthusiastic about the project, I became curious to find out what was behind this success. This curiosity made me decide to enter into the invitation of one of the coaches of the self-study to do an intake for teacher educators. The offer to participate in the self-study came just in time. I decided to make this project the focus of a self-study research in which I concentrated on my own role as facilitator.

As a researcher I aimed at learning how to conduct a self-study myself and in interaction with three participants, teacher educators as well, and the three coaches at the Free

<sup>1</sup> This study was conducted within the project of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam: "Teacher trainers study their own practice". It was supported by the coaches: Mieke Lunenberg, Fred Korthagen and Rosanne Zwart.

University of Amsterdam (VU). I wished to know if/why my actions were important. Self-study relies on interaction with close colleagues who can listen actively and constructively (Russell, 2006, p.5).

## Theoretical Framework

This project can be seen as an example of a community in the definition of Wenger (2002): “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” Grossman and her colleagues (2001) state that in such communities people get together to improve their practice and to enhance their intellectual development.

I found little research that examines the concrete behavior of a facilitator in a professional learning community. My coach of the self-study helped me find recent literature based on the results of the research by Platteel on how a collaborative action-research partnership developed. In her paper she described actions unravelled with the help of metaphors.

In a learning community a facilitator often has multiple roles; for example, the roles of colleague, tutor, and language methodologist. In their research, Platteel, et al, looked into this combination of roles. They described a collaborative action research project in which teachers, facilitators and academic researchers form a partnership and together design mother-tongue education.

Platteel, et al, coined four metaphors, which were used before by Wadsworth (2001): the Compass, the Mirror, the Map, and the Magnifying Glass. The facilitator as a Compass leads the process and helps participants find what they are aiming for. As a Mirror, the facilitator motivates learning community members to reflect on their own practice and on other people’s practice. In the role of Map, the facilitator suggests the routes participants may follow and the obstacles they may encounter *en route*, while the Magnifying Glass helps participants focus on specific elements of their learning. Table 1 presents the actions based on the theory of Platteel.

Table 1:

*The Actions of the Facilitator in the Context of the Four Metaphors*

Metaphor	Actions of the Facilitator
Compass	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask what the group’s goal is.</li> <li>• Help the group find its way; the group members make their own decisions about where to go.</li> <li>• Give group members the opportunity to discuss things.</li> <li>• Help group members formulate questions or summarise ideas.</li> </ul>
Mirror	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use learning methods focused on reflection.</li> <li>• Ask questions to understand the group members’ practice.</li> <li>• Ask how this practice can be improved and why it needs to be improved.</li> <li>• Encourage the exchange of classroom activities.</li> <li>• Offer the group members the opportunity to say how they see themselves or each other.</li> </ul>
Map	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiate the project.</li> <li>• Pay attention to obstacles and possibilities.</li> <li>• Ask the group members how the collaboration is going.</li> <li>• Describe how they develop their lessons.</li> <li>• Help them to define steps aimed at improvement.</li> </ul>
Magnifying Glass	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on a specific aspect of the project or of the teaching practice.</li> </ul>

## Methods

The self-study focuses on the following central research question: What does a facilitator do to enable learning within a language group? The sub questions are: (1) What roles do I play in a successful language community? (2) What action do I undertake as a facilitator?

**Data Collection.** In order to answer the above questions, I used two different ways to collect data: applying a questionnaire and analysing the videotapes of the meetings.

**Open-question questionnaire.** The academic researcher and I developed a questionnaire to answer the question whether or not the participants wished to continue working in the language community. This questionnaire was not developed with the self-study in mind, but was used for the self-study as it could provide additional information relating to the research question.

**Videotapes.** The academic researcher videotaped 22 meetings throughout the year. Four of these were analyzed for my self-study. The timeline in Figure 2 below indicates which meetings were analyzed, who facilitated the meeting, and what subject was discussed.

The self-study group and I decided to analyze four meetings throughout the school year. In the first video (September 2007), I was in charge of the session, chose the subject, made sure this subject was also discussed at the teacher training institute, and helped the group design a reading lesson. We choose this video because it was exemplary for me as a methodologist leading the sessions. I was asking questions and giving advice. In the second video (December 2007), a student teacher chaired the session, presented her writing project, and asked the other group members for feedback. This video shows that my role of a methodologist changed mainly into the role of the teacher. My questions were related on the information of the writing project in order to use it in my lessons with my pupils of 16 years. The third video (January 2008) shows how I, as a methodologist, initiated plans for making a reader for our colleagues at school and university with the lessons that had

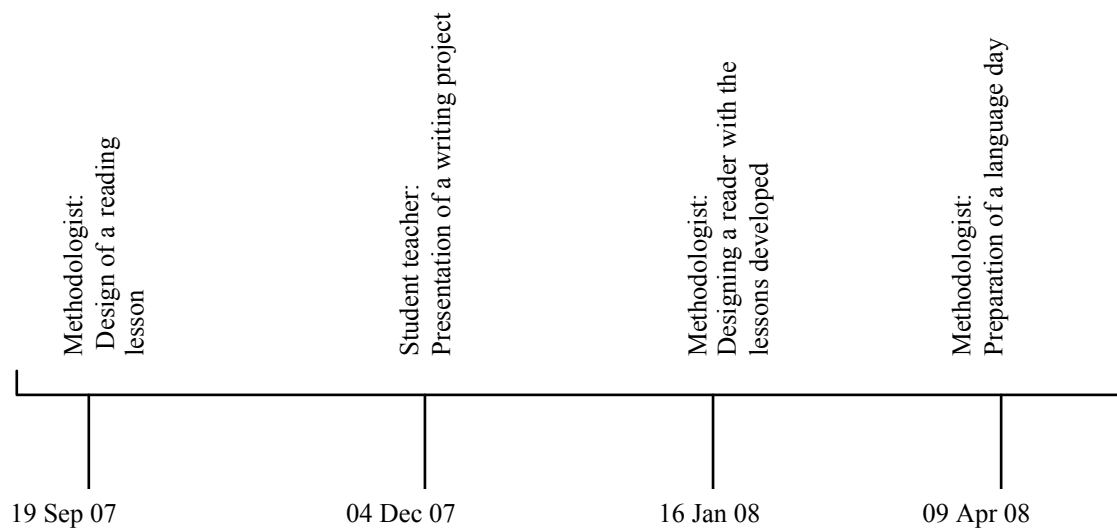


Figure 1. Timeline of the meetings analysed

been developed during the project. Here I was again the leading lady. I wished to share the results with other (student) teachers of schools and university. In the last video (April 2008), I was also the chair. I prepared a one-day meeting with all language student teachers, university language methodologists, and the other participants of the project. This video is an example of how I prepared a university activity. It was the idea of my colleagues of the university. The aim of this day was to design and give a 'good practice' lesson.

## Data Analysis

Both questionnaire and videotapes were first analyzed with Platteel et al's metaphors as criteria. I analyzed the questionnaire focusing on my roles and actions in order to find what the other participants thought about the sessions with regard to (a) the learning method used; (b) the role of the educator (Joke Rentrop); (c) the difference between when the educator prepared the sessions and when the student-teachers prepared the sessions; (d) the structure of sessions; and (e) the products.

The answers participants provided to question b gave data for my first research question. The answers to the other points and the analysis of the videotapes provided me with data for the second research question. I started by examining the tapes myself. I made a diagram consisting of two columns. In the first column I wrote down the actions I carried out. In the second column I coded these using the four metaphors as described by Platteel. Then I twice repeated this analysis. One repetition took place with the self-study group: I gave the group a diagram with the two columns and I showed them the tapes. They coded my actions and then we discussed if these actions were covered by the metaphors. They didn't mark any tensions. Dooner (2007) stated that educational leaders are often unable to help teachers navigate effectively through the inevitable tensions that surface in group work. The self-study group and I discovered that we couldn't code my affective and inspiring actions. We found out that these were crucial for the creation of a group that offers security and enthusiasm. Therefore, a fifth metaphor was needed and I coined the metaphor Flame.

The second time I repeated the coding it was done with Platteel, the author of the thesis that outlined the metaphors

I used. Moreover I asked her how she coded the affective actions in her research, She had collected data with the help of audiotapes. She coded these under the metaphor Mirror, i.e. when the facilitator says, "Good luck!" he means: "I wish you good luck." The facilitator shows his emotions. The self-study group and I used videos. We analyzed the non-verbal and verbal actions and coded them under the Flame.

A facilitator can be seen as an explorer. Explorers need certain instruments to find their way, such as a map, a magnifying glass, a mirror and a compass. A flame is also a necessary instrument for a facilitator. The facilitator lights the flame, keeps the fire going, and passes it on to others. The flame emits two types of fire: holy fire, which represents inspiration, and hearth fire, which represents affection and warmth.

## Results

In this part I answer my research questions, based on the results of the analyses of the questionnaire and the videotapes.

### Roles I adopt in a successful language community.

Analysis of the questionnaire made clear that the participants regarded me first and foremost as a methodologist. Analysis of the videotapes showed that I fulfil several roles in the language community: I function as a methodologist, tutor, and colleague. However, the role that was fulfilled most was the role of methodologist.

**Actions I undertake as a facilitator.** Figure 2 and 3 present the concrete actions of me as the facilitator, based on the analyses. Based on our analysis of the data, we have added a fifth metaphor: the Flame. All of these actions were executed in the role of methodologist, except where the other roles have been indicated in brackets (i.e. tutor and colleague).

## Conclusions and Discussion

In this self-study research I examined which actions the facilitator undertakes to enable learning within a language group. I focused on the different roles I adopted in the successful language community that was part of the experimental project *Language methodology on the spot*. Based on this self-study, I conclude that my role was mostly that

Metaphor	Actions of the facilitator
Compass	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask the school management what the school's goals are for this project.</li> </ul>
Mirror	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask the school management about these issues.</li> </ul>
Map	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involve the school management in the organisation of the project.</li> <li>• Provide a clearly structured programme.</li> <li>• Use different teaching methods.</li> <li>• Provide structure during the sessions.</li> <li>• Give participants the opportunity to make their own contributions</li> </ul>
Magnifying glass	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide theory.</li> <li>• Stimulate the exchange of lesson ideas.</li> <li>• Give tips.</li> <li>• Develop a reader with the lessons produced during the project.</li> </ul>
Flame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give the group members time at the beginning of the sessions to acclimatise: coffee and small talk (colleague).</li> <li>• Show an interest in business outside the project (colleague).</li> <li>• Discuss effective teacher behaviour regarding difficult pupils with the student teachers (tutor).</li> <li>• Answer questions about university assignments (tutor).</li> <li>• Give the student teachers positive encouragement before their lessons (tutor).</li> <li>• Thank the participants for their contributions (colleague).</li> </ul>

Figure 2. The actions of the facilitator in the context of the five metaphors

of methodologist. However, in learning on the spot it is not sufficient for the facilitator to be only a methodologist: the facilitator also needs to be able to adopt the roles of tutor and colleague.

The use of Platteel et al's four metaphors (Mirror, Magnifying Glass, Compass, Map) helped to clarify the roles and the actions of the facilitator. The actions mentioned in Figure 2 were the same actions that I fulfilled in the language group. However, the analysis of the data made clear that I needed a fifth metaphor to cover the affective and inspirational interventions that turned out to be crucial. In the Flame metaphor I adopted the roles of tutor and colleague, for example, by showing an interest in personal or school affairs. These interpersonal actions helped build a secure and warm learning environment.

I found that few of my actions were related to the Mirror metaphor. Mirror actions enable the student teachers to transfer the insights gained here to other contexts after their study. This means that in future I need to pay more attention to these important actions. By contrast, many of my actions were related to the Map metaphor. Such actions are necessary to map out a route. It is likely that there will be fewer of such actions in a follow-up project, which would give greater scope for Mirror, Compass and Magnifying Glass actions.

The initiator and the subjects of the meetings were a decisive factor in labelling the different roles. As a methodologist, I directed the development of a reading lesson. Moreover, as a methodologist, I gave additional information about language acquisition theories after a student teacher had presented her writing project. In my role as a tutor, I could make student teachers more enthusiastic about their next lesson.

The table in Figure 3 cannot be simply transferred as a list of activities to be used if colleagues want to carry out this project at their own school. It describes facilitating actions that are carried out in more than one role.

## A Learning Community within the School

At the start of the experiment I thought that the project would help the student teachers: they would follow the programme of the teacher training institute and could immediately apply this knowledge in school practice. However, the academic researcher's feedback as well as the theoretical insights have made me change my mind. After fine-tuning the goals and expectations, a facilitator in a project similar to this should abandon the methodological programme of the teacher training institute. The participants can determine themselves which subjects are meaningful and useful to them at a certain moment. At first I focused on the content and only after the autumn break did I change my focus to the process. This change proved to be crucial for the construction and continuation of the teacher's learning community.

## Results for the Educational Institute

As a methodologist at a teacher training institute I have become more aware of the need for fine-tuning with the student teacher's school. This has led to a renewal of the programme by me and my fellow methodologists. There are still regular methodology meetings in the new programme. However, in addition, student teachers develop lessons together with their methodology teacher in small groups. This intensive cooperation gives the methodology teacher greater insight into the teacher's and the student teacher's contexts.

## Personal Development and Benefit

Theory has become more important for me because it gave me the answers that I needed regarding the way the facilitator functions in the workplace. Data analysis made the facilitating actions more explicit. I realised that I was accepted and greatly valued in my role as a methodologist in the workplace, and this has increased my confidence to



share my knowledge with student teachers and experienced teachers alike. I have become exceedingly enthusiastic about doing research. As a result, I have been actively trying to organise a follow-up to this project.

As a researcher in a self-study group I discovered that my actions were indeed important. The coaches and the participants made me aware of my strength in forming a learning community.

As a facilitator I played the roles of methodologist, colleague and tutor. I performed a great variety of actions and continued to learn in my diverse roles. In particular, I derived great satisfaction from the Flame actions, which represent both inspirational fervour and affective attention for the members of the learning community.

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