A design research study on fostering communities of learners for students in pre-vocational secondary education

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22. A design research study on fostering communities of learners for students in prevocational secondary education

Annoesjka Boersma, Karen Krol, Geert ten Dam, Wim Wardekker & Monique Volman

Abstract

In this chapter, the use of communities of learners in prevocational secondary education is investigated via design research. We aimed to translate theoretical notions about communities of learners into educational practice during two years of joint design by teachers and researchers, a process supported by one of the school’s leader. We expected communities of learners to enhance students’ quality of and engagement in learning. In this chapter, we provide a detailed review of the first year of our study at one of the schools, where we developed and evaluated two curriculum units. We focus on how the teachers collaborated with the school leader and the researchers to develop curriculum units that would foster communities of learners and how (developing and implementing) the curriculum units affected student learning. Data were collected through observations of all the meetings of the development team, all the lessons of the implemented units, and interviews with teachers and students. The results show that the teachers’ focus was mainly on designing engaging activities for their students. The community of learners concept did not seem to become meaningful for them, and little reflection on the concept’s relationship to the school’s vision regarding teaching and learning occurred. The second curriculum unit succeeded better at promoting student learning in the intended way; the units became part of the regular curriculum, and similar units were developed later.

1. Introduction

The ‘community of learners’ concept has become increasingly popular in educational discourse. It evokes images of harmonious collaboration, vivid dialogue, and highly motivated students who actively participate in deep and meaningful learning. Nevertheless, communities of learners have only minimally emerged in actual classroom practice. For many teachers, organising a community of learners entails considerable effort, with an unclear outcome at best. For teachers to realise the potential of the community of learners concept, they must understand the practical value of such a community.

The design research study reported in this chapter aimed to elaborate the community of learners concept for use in prevocational secondary education. For two years, Dutch researchers and teachers jointly designed, developed, and evaluated curriculum units for the ninth grade vocational subject Care and Welfare that would foster communities of learners in the classroom to enhance students’ quality of and engagement in learning. At the two participating schools, a school leader supported the teachers to ensure that their efforts would be linked to school development. In addition to developing an innovative intervention, we aimed to identify and refine a number of heuristics that might help others put communities of learners into practice. A second aim of the study was to provide insight into the curriculum unit development process by the teachers in collaboration with the school leader and researchers, as we assumed that collaboration would affect the development of curriculum units that foster a community of learners for vocational orientation.
Our design research entailed three phases: 1) a preliminary phase, which included analysing the context and problems of prevocational teaching and learning and developing a conceptual framework of communities of learners for students in prevocational secondary education; 2) a descriptive phase, in which the conceptual framework was checked against the educational practices of the two participating schools to validate the usefulness of the framework and determine the state of teaching-learning processes at the schools; and 3) a dual and cyclical development and evaluation phase, consisting of a) a first year, in which at each school, two curriculum units were designed, carried out, and formatively evaluated regarding design heuristics and students’ quality of and engagement in learning and b) a second year, in which the first year’s units were optimised and carried out, followed by a formative and summative evaluation that focused on design heuristics and students’ quality of and engagement in learning.

This chapter begins with a brief outline of Dutch prevocational secondary education, the context of our study. Next, our conceptual framework is described and research questions are formulated, followed by an overview of how we set up our design research study. In the results section, we narrow our focus to the design process and the resulting curriculum units at one school in the first year of the study, i.e., phase 3a, which clearly illustrates our design research approach. In conclusion, we describe both the practical and scientific yield of our community of learners project in a discussion of the results, and we reflect on our design research approach.

2. Context and problems of prevocational secondary education

In the Dutch secondary education system, prevocational secondary education complements general secondary education (see Figure 1). At age 12, students enter both education types, each including half of all students. The central aim of prevocational secondary education is to further develop students’ general competences (e.g., language, mathematics) and to prepare them for senior secondary vocational education. As such, vocational orientation is a crucial aspect of prevocational learning. Students complete a core curriculum in the first two years; afterward, students from age 14 years onward continue their education in one of four vocationally contextualised sectors: Engineering and Technology, Care and Welfare, Business, and Agriculture.

Figure 1: Overview of the Dutch system of regular secondary and tertiary education (adapted from Boersma, Ten Dam, Volman, & Wardekker, 2010)
In these sectors, teaching and learning are mainly organised in (simulated) workplaces inside and outside the school to allow students to experience working in a particular vocational area. An analysis of the prevocational teaching and learning context in these sectors revealed several problems (phase 1). In simulations, students are often not introduced to social and cultural aspects of the workplace, and the exigencies at most real workplaces leave students little opportunity to retreat and reflect. Moreover, although schools for prevocational education aim to prepare students for their futures, many students do not appreciate the value of school-based learning.

3. Conceptual framework
We argue that to facilitate vocational orientation and student engagement, school and work should be integrated as contexts for learning. Students should have the opportunity to participate in vocational activities that are designed to offer space and intellectual instruments for critical reflection on associated vocational practices and students’ abilities and affinities regarding these practices. Based on the literature about ‘communities of learners’ (Brown & Campione, 1994) and ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 1998), we distinguished four interrelated parameters to define a ‘community of learners for vocational orientation’ in the first phase of the study: shared learning, meaningful learning, reflective learning, and learning for transfer. The four parameters are elaborated in Boersma, Ten Dam, Volman, and Wardekker (2010, p. 9) as follows:

Shared learning refers to a learning environment in which students jointly strive to reach a shared goal. In a community of learners for vocational orientation, students and teachers ideally work co-operatively, as colleagues working at an institution or company helping clients. The students are regarded as peripheral but legitimate members, and teachers and professionals are considered experienced members of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, Goodman-Turkanis, & Bartlett, 2001). All the community members interact and share knowledge to attain their goal, thereby acquiring new knowledge, skills, and attitudes, both individually and as a group.

Meaningful learning refers to the use of learned information to benefit society by working in society in the future and to benefit the students personally. Students are supposed to develop competences in school that are indispensable to society. Nevertheless, students do not always understand the importance of developing these competences in line with their personal goals and lives. In our envisioned community of learners for vocational orientation, students participate in authentic vocational practices. They then frequently experience an inability to participate fully in these practices because of faulty or missing competences. The assumption is that this experience and the students’ wish to be part of the community of vocational practice make students realise that the competences our society requires are in fact competences that they themselves need.

Reflective learning refers to the need for students to reflect on the content of what they are learning and the processes through which that learning takes place. ‘Learning through participation’ is not just a matter of participating; if students are to develop competences and a professional identity, the quality of participation should be improved through reflection. A community of learners for vocational orientation ideally prompts reflection at three levels. First, students are encouraged to reflect on the way they function and develop as beginning professionals in a particular work sphere. Second, students are encouraged to think critically about the importance of the profession for society. Third, students are encouraged to realise what being a professional within the work sphere means to them.

The last parameter is learning for transfer. Students should be made aware that the concepts and processes they are introduced to are generative and useful across many settings.
In a community of learners for vocational orientation, students ideally acquire competences in the context of their intended use, i.e., a certain vocational practice. Students construct new knowledge, identities, ways of knowing, and positions in the world. They become someone new (Beach, 1999). When they become aware of these changes, students are able to use their new identity in other contexts. They themselves are then the bridges between different settings. The implication is that students should be encouraged to reflect on why they need to learn certain concepts or ways of doing things and how this learning relates to their lives as future professionals.

In the second phase of the study, we used the parameters of our conceptual framework of a community of learners for vocational orientation to analyse whether and how these parameters were already manifested in the teaching-learning processes in the ninth grade Care and Welfare classes in the two schools participating in our study (see Figure 2). At both schools, the learning environment for this vocational subject largely consisted of simulated workplaces. Students between 14 and 15 years old learned in small groups based on theoretical and work-related practical assignments associated with each of the simulated workplaces (i.e., Welfare, Housekeeping, General Services, Care Assistance, Beauty Care, and Workplace Assistance). The practical assignments were rather prescriptive, focusing on technical aspects (for example, learning to bathe a baby was guided by a worksheet with step-by-step instructions regarding how to check the water temperature and how to lift the baby) rather than the wide array of vocational practice aspects (for example, the Western cultural value of intentionally stimulating a baby’s development by interacting with the baby during bathing). Moreover, the tasks were isolated from related tasks within the vocational practice (for example, informing parents about their baby’s diarrhoea), which limits students’ insight into the task’s purpose. The practical assignments aimed to complement the theoretical assignments, but students were not explicitly encouraged to relate their practical experience to theoretical knowledge and vice versa. From our analysis, we concluded that shared learning and meaningful learning were only partially manifested. Little evidence was found of reflective learning and learning for transfer. The dialogue with the teachers concerning these findings enabled us to identify starting points (tentative heuristics) for designing curriculum units, i.e., series of lessons that foster communities of learners for vocational orientation (for further results from the preliminary and descriptive phases, see Boersma et al., 2010).

In this chapter, we focus on the third phase of our study, specifically the design process and the resulting curriculum units at one school during the first year of development and evaluation. This first year clearly illustrates our design research approach, in which experienced teachers, who were motivated to participate in the study, were invited to collaborate with the school leader and researchers on equal terms (see ‘Research design’ below). We used this approach to support the development of curriculum units that foster a community of learners for vocational orientation. We address the following research questions:

1. How did the teachers collaborate with the school leader and researchers during the process of developing curriculum units that would foster communities of learners for vocational orientation?

2. Did the implemented curriculum units promote student learning in the intended shared, meaningful, reflective, and transfer-oriented way?

The answers to the first research question will contribute to our aim of providing insight into the process of developing curriculum units. The answers to the second research question will contribute to our aim of investigating the potential of the communities of learners concept for use in prevocational secondary education.
4. Research design

To understand the nature of our design research, some ideas that underlie our approach need to be explained. The teachers and leaders in the schools and the researchers were equally in charge of our joint endeavour (designing curriculum units that foster communities of learners for students). In addition to the theoretical input provided by the researchers, teachers’ practical knowledge was valued in accounting for the contextual factors that affect teaching and learning. This practical knowledge would contribute to the realisation of ecologically valid curriculum units and the implementation of the units as intended. These aspects are essential for allowing the researchers to draw valid conclusions about the curriculum units’ influence on students’ learning. Thus, the design process was not pre-determined by the researchers but shaped by the teachers and school leaders. We expected our approach to help teachers and school leaders develop ownership of the designed curriculum units. To guarantee that the designed curriculum units would be closely related to the schools’ vision regarding teaching and learning, the school leaders were involved in the study.

The grey part of Figure 2 provides an overview of the first year of development and evaluation for one of the schools. The first year consisted of two cycles of curriculum unit design, implementation, and evaluation. The evaluation outcomes of the first design cycle (curriculum unit 1: Coffee Morning unit) were applied in the second design cycle to create a second curriculum unit (unit 2: Activity Morning unit) that would better foster a community of learners for vocational orientation. In the second year, both these curriculum units were optimised, implemented, and formatively and summatively evaluated.

In both design, implementation, and evaluation cycles at the school, two teachers, one school leader, and two researchers were involved. Table 1 presents the development team’s activities during the phases of each cycle.

To answer the first research question (on the curriculum unit development process), we gathered data on all the actions of and interactions among the researchers, school leader, and teachers during the design process of both cycles. All the design hours of the Care and Welfare teachers and the researcher; the joint meetings of the teachers, the researchers, and the school leaders were included in the analysis. The grey part of Figure 2 shows the first year of development and evaluation (phase 3a), as situated between the descriptive phase (phase 2) and the second year of development and evaluation (phase 3b).

Figure 2: Overview of the first year of development and evaluation (the grey part, phase 3a), as situated between the descriptive phase (phase 2) and the second year of development and evaluation (phase 3b)

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leader; and school wide occasions, such as study days, were reported. These reports were submitted to and approved by the teachers and/or the school leader. A second researcher acted as the observer during several design hours and all the joint meetings to substantiate the researcher’s interpretations and provide feedback to the researcher and school leader during the design hours. Using member checks of the written reports and a researcher as an observer, we enhanced the intersubjectivity of this study.

Table 1: Overview of activities during both cycles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coffee morning unit</th>
<th>Activity morning unit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Design (10 weeks)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Design (14 weeks)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teachers and researcher</td>
<td>The teachers and researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spent 16 hours designing the curriculum</td>
<td>spent 25 hours designing the curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unit for the students.</td>
<td>unit for the students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teachers, researchers, and school</td>
<td>The teachers, researchers, and school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leader spent 3 hours in joint meetings.</td>
<td>leader spent 7 hours in joint meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The implemented curriculum unit comprised</td>
<td>The implemented curriculum unit comprised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 lessons in total, in which students</td>
<td>40 lessons in total, in which the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prepared for, executed, and reflected on</td>
<td>prepared for, executed, and reflected on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an event with elderly people.</td>
<td>an event with primary school children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The researchers and teachers evaluated</td>
<td>Researchers and teachers evaluated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the design and implementation phases in</td>
<td>the design and implementation phases in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>four 3-hour meetings.</td>
<td>four 3-hour meetings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To answer the second research question (on student learning), the reports of the design hours and the resulting lesson materials were gathered to determine how the parameters of a community of learners for vocational orientation had been incorporated into the designs. In addition, all the lessons were video recorded and separately evaluated in the teachers’ and students’ interviews to determine how the parameters were manifested in the implemented curriculum units. All the evaluations were voice recorded and fully transcribed. The written accounts of the design hours and the joint meetings and the transcripts of the evaluations with the teachers were systematically analysed using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) matrix-display technique. The analysis consisted of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During the data reduction process, the written accounts of the design hours and the transcripts of the evaluations were reduced to the core. Fragments of the written accounts and transcripts were placed in a two-dimensional matrix with time on the horizontal axis and relevant themes (among which are the parameters of a community of learners) on the vertical axis. The researchers identified categories and patterns based on the condensed matrix and drew conclusions. The researchers verified these conclusions by reviewing the raw data once more. During this process, we actively looked for examples and counterexamples.

1 An example of the matrix can be obtained from the authors.
5. Results
In this section, for each of the two curriculum units, we first describe the design process and the resulting curriculum unit and then evaluate the collaboration of the teachers with the school leader and researchers during this process (research question 1) and student learning during the implemented curriculum units (research question 2) at one school during one (the first) research year.

Design process of curriculum unit 1: The Coffee Morning unit
The teachers, researchers, and school leader jointly shaped the process of design of the Coffee morning unit. The design process involved three steps: 1) creating a rough plan, 2) elaborating learning goals, learning content, and learning activities and assessing students' learning outcomes, and 3) checking the four design parameters.

Step 1: Creating a rough plan
During a brainstorm session, the two teachers proposed organising an event for elderly people that would give students the opportunity to talk with the elderly and participate in activities with them. Elderly people are an interesting target group for Care and Welfare students' vocational orientation because the students may work with the elderly in their future workplaces. The teachers focused on how to organise the Coffee Morning unit in terms of both the event and the consequences for the regular curriculum. After several practical considerations were discussed, it was decided that the curriculum unit would be embedded in the regular lesson plan. The researcher tried not to disrupt the teachers' enthusiasm and remained open to their ideas and approaches. The school leader supported the idea of inviting the elderly people to the school because this activity would provide an authentic experience for the students, which was in line with the schools' vision regarding teaching and learning.

Step 2: Elaborating learning goals, learning content, and learning activities and assessing student's learning outcomes
After creating a rough plan, the teachers focused on determining what activities would be appropriate for students to undertake with the elderly people. The teachers proposed activities that were mainly inspired by the worksheets used in the regular curriculum: serving coffee and cake, polishing shoes, painting fingernails, and playing a game. Thus, the regular classroom curriculum was the teachers' starting point for the design. They did not explicitly define the goals or how to assess student's learning outcomes. The researcher guided the process by asking which competencies students should develop and what kinds of tasks would contribute to this aim. Because the teachers found answering these questions difficult, the researcher elaborated on competence-based learning. In addition, the researcher gave examples of how the design parameters were already incorporated in the regular worksheets and how to further incorporate them. During two joint meetings, the school leader encouraged the teachers to reflect on the design parameters and noted that the teachers may consider the students' opinion regarding the event, emphasising the importance of meaningful learning. As a result, the teachers asked the students to complete a worksheet elaborating an activity they would undertake with the elderly people.

Step 3: Checking the four design parameters
The researcher took the initiative in incorporating the design parameters presented above during three of the four design meetings and tried to involve the teachers by posing questions. The third design meeting was devoted to determining to what extent the four parameters were rooted in the design. The researcher concluded that the parameters were present in the overall
design but proposed alternatives regarding how to incorporate these parameters into the regular worksheets. Although the teachers appreciated this input, the suggestions were only partly implemented, mainly by the researcher herself. The teachers were clearly focused on other aspects of the design process, indicating the teachers’ limited understanding of the parameters to that point. In two meetings, the school leader emphasised the importance of vocational orientation. By participating in professional activities during the Coffee Morning event, students could experience being part of a community of (vocational) practice and being a professional care provider (professional identity).

**Brief description of curriculum unit 1 as intended: The Coffee Morning**

In the final design of the Coffee Morning unit, the four parameters are manifested in learning and instructional activities as follows. *Shared learning* is incorporated while maintaining the regular division of students in small groups into simulated workplaces (i.e., Welfare and Housekeeping). The groups are responsible for a specific part of the organisational tasks. The students make the invitations, pick up the elderly people from the service flat, welcome the elderly people to the classroom, set up the tables, and make coffee and arrange cake. In addition, each group talks with a group of elderly people about their specific simulated workplace and undertake two activities with the elderly. The students decide on one activity, and the other activity is required as part of the regular curriculum. By requiring the students to participate in these activities, the group identity and the shared goals of the small group are emphasised.

*Meaningful learning* is promoted by having the students know from the start of the project that they would engage in activities with ‘real’ elderly people. As a result, the preparatory lessons for the event are more meaningful for the students, because they need to be able to skilfully interact with the elderly in a few weeks. The opportunity for the students to decide on an activity to undertake with the elderly contributes to meaningfulness of the learning.

*Reflective learning* is addressed with the use of a competence card. When the project begins, two weeks into the project, and after the event, the students evaluate how competent they think they are on a competence card created by the teachers. The competencies pertain to the preparatory lessons, the conversation about the workplace, the organisation of the activity they chose, and the obligatory activity. The students add competences that are fundamental to the activity that they plan to undertake with the elderly. Reflection is also encouraged during the evaluation after the Coffee Morning event. In groups, students discuss their impressions of the event, what they would do differently, and what they learned. The groups present the results from their evaluations to each other.

*A focus on transferable learning outcomes* is promoted by the organisational composition of the curriculum unit. The students are presented with situations that are increasingly complex. What students learned in the training situation (simulation with classmates) should be applied when they interact with the elderly people during the Coffee Morning event. Learning for transfer is also promoted by conducting a single activity in different ways to show why one way may work better than others. For example, students may find that serving coffee or cake along the left side of a person might cause students to elbow guests in the face.

**Evaluation of the Coffee Morning unit**

**Evaluation of the design process**

How did the teachers collaborate with the school leader and researchers while developing the curriculum units? We concluded that during the design cycle of the Coffee Morning unit, the teachers and researchers did not share the goal of fostering communities of learners for
vocational orientation for students. Whereas the researchers’ aim was on realising the design parameters, the teachers were mostly concerned with organising a new and interesting activity for the students. The researcher, after assuming an attitude of expectation, supported the teachers in the design process by providing a theoretical background for learning in communities of learners and practical suggestions regarding how to incorporate the parameters into the curriculum unit and materials. Still, the teachers considered the parameters of the community of learners for vocational orientation to be the researcher’s concern. To guarantee the research aims and guide the design process, the researcher noted that during the joint design of the next curriculum unit, the teachers should address the learning goals and the parameters earlier in the process.

During the joint meetings, the school leader encouraged the teachers to reflect on the choices made during the design process by asking reflective questions. Accordingly, he encouraged the teachers to reflect on the link between the schools’ vision regarding teaching and learning and the way this vision was operationalised in the curriculum unit. Although the teachers themselves requested the meetings with the school leader and the researchers, they showed resistance when they found that the meetings focused on why the activities were performed rather than on practical issues related to the activities. Explicit reflection on their own behaviours, choices, and motives was not a common activity for the teachers, although they stated that they ‘reflected all day long’ (i.e., engaged in implicit reflection).

In sum, the teachers, school leader, and researchers all contributed to the development of the Coffee Morning unit. However, despite the efforts of the school leader and researchers, the parameters of a community of learners only had limited meaning for the teachers. Furthermore, encouraging the teachers to focus on their own learning processes led to resistance.

**Evaluation of the implemented curriculum unit**

The second research question, ‘Did the implemented Coffee Morning unit promote student learning in the intended shared, meaningful, reflective, and transfer-oriented way?’, is answered for each parameter.

The division of tasks aimed to promote shared learning. However, because the teachers were in charge of allocating and coordinating the tasks, the groups of students did not need to engage in joint discussions, provide each other with feedback, or work together as classmates. The students knew what to do in their group but knew little about what other groups were doing. As a consequence, the activities that should have promoted shared learning were often not performed as intended. The students worked on the worksheets independently, did not read them properly, and consequently did not follow the steps delineated on the worksheets. Because of the teachers’ lack of ownership in designing the worksheets, they did not know how to guide the students in completing the worksheets. Thus, it was concluded that in the next curriculum unit the teachers should know the content and procedures presented on the worksheets by participating in designing the worksheets and that they should pay more attention to realizing positive interdependence between the students.

Working with ‘real’ people was intended to foster meaningful learning. The activities, however, only became meaningful halfway through the curriculum unit, when the event was approaching. During the preparatory lessons, the students received little information about elderly people and how they live, which made it difficult for the students to empathise with their target group. Moreover, the students were not matched to one specific person whom they could focus on, learn more about, and feel responsible for. During the event, it became clear that most of the elderly people were very bright and in good health. Because this specific group of people was quite different from what the students had learned about during the lessons, the students could not fully apply the competences they had practiced. The activities that the students selected to
do with the elderly proved to be meaningful for the students but did not always fit the needs or desires of the elderly. Thus, in the next series of lessons, it was concluded that efforts should be made to acquaint the students with the characteristics of their guests and the person they would be responsible for early in the project and to link the content of the preparatory lessons with the characteristics of these guests.

Although the students completed the competence card properly, most students did so at the request of the teacher rather than because they wanted to reflect on what they had learned. During the joint evaluation after the Coffee Morning event, it became clear that the students were aware of what they and their classmates did and did not do well with the elderly guests, although some students found it difficult to provide constructive feedback to one another. Additionally, the students mentioned the feedback they had received from the elderly guests. The students’ reflection was most evident in their presentation of their evaluations. Most noteworthy from these presentations was the change in student perceptions of working with elderly people from ‘boring’ to ‘pleasant’. It was concluded that reflection should be made meaningful for the students, for instance, through presenting what they learned. Moreover, explicit direction should be given regarding providing constructive feedback.

Learning for transfer was promoted by the increasing complexity of the activity (practicing from a worksheet, simulating the experience through role playing, and actually participating in the event). During these phases, instruction also addressed why activities should be undertaken in a particular way. The students, however, did not experience increasing complexity through this design. The students did not perform the role playing seriously until the teacher noted the purpose of the simulation. Moreover, the worksheets that addressed the purpose of the activities were not always followed as intended by the students. These observations show the importance of the teacher’s role in encouraging learning for transfer during the lessons. When the teacher explained the purpose of the activities, reflection occurred in a self-evident way. It was concluded that students should be informed about the purpose of the different elements of the lessons during the next curriculum unit and that the purpose of activities should also be made explicit during the lessons.

**Design process of curriculum unit 2: The Activity Morning**

During the second part of the school year, the same teachers, researchers, and school leader designed another curriculum unit, the ‘Activity Morning’. Findings from the experiences in designing the Coffee Morning unit were applied to this new design.

**Step 1: Creating a rough plan**

The teachers proposed presenting activities in a primary school to give students the opportunity to gain experience with another relevant Care and Welfare target group, school children. Similar to the Coffee Morning unit design process, the teachers started to focus on the different organisational aspects of the project (which site, which age group) and how the new curriculum unit would relate to the regular curriculum. The teachers were inspired by a study day on cooperative learning structures in their school and wanted to incorporate these structures into the design. Because the researcher and teachers concluded in evaluating the Coffee Morning unit that the learning goals and parameters should be addressed earlier in the design process, the researcher started to steer the process by explicitly linking the teachers’ plans to the goals of the research project. Because integrating the Coffee Morning unit into a regular workplace was complicated, the teachers decided to design an isolated curriculum unit for this project. The researcher did not advocate for abandoning the regular workplace structure, because this learning environment offers the opportunity to shape the learning for transfer parameter, and anticipated that an isolated curriculum unit would not be a lasting part of the curriculum.
The teachers, however, persisted in viewing the regular workplaces as an element separate from the Activity Morning unit. The school leader provided support regarding organisational issues and the design itself. He suggested a primary school and proposed a circulation system for the different activities during the event at the primary school site. Moreover, he asked the teachers to present their experiences with the Coffee Morning unit to the school team, with a focus on the elements that promoted meaningful learning, authentic learning, and learning for transfer.

**Step 2: Elaborating learning goals, learning content, and learning activities and assessing students’ learning outcomes**

The researcher proposed creating a lesson plan that included the following elements: learning goals, learning content, lesson composition, instructional methods, materials, lesson conclusion, and parameters of a community of learners for vocational orientation. Her aim was to structure the design process to facilitate the replication of the design at another time or by other teachers. The teachers supported this idea and decided to work out this lesson plan in the five weeks before the curriculum unit was implemented. On the researcher’s initiative, the teachers discussed which of the examination regulations were relevant to address in the curriculum unit. The teachers also discussed which learning goals they thought were important to the students. They discussed what students had to learn to work with primary school children; however, how the various learning goals related to each other was not evident to the teachers. The teachers discussed what curriculum content should be addressed each week to prepare the students for the event. For each learning activity, an instructional method was designed. The researcher and the teachers used the materials from the study day on cooperative learning structures to create learning activities and were inspired to develop their own structures. The school leader followed the design process, asking the teachers to report what they had already designed and their further plans. He also provided input on the design and actively participated in preparing the presentation for the school team.

**Step 3: Checking the four design parameters**

The teachers, supported by the researcher, thoroughly prepared the first lessons of the curriculum unit. However, the teachers found it difficult to work systematically and translate the abstract parameters of a community of learners into learning activities. Working out the cooperative learning structures was more difficult than expected. Finally, only two weeks were left to create the lesson materials. While implementing the first week’s lessons, the design hours were used to discuss how the upcoming weeks’ learning activities should be performed. Time pressure made it even more difficult for the teachers to think about how to incorporate the parameters of a community of learners into the design; again, the researcher posed questions to the teachers about the extent to which the parameters were incorporated in the design and made suggestions for improvements. The school leader was involved in the planning process and deciding on the design content during the joint meetings and helped emphasise the link between the school’s vision and the parameters.

**Brief description of curriculum unit 2 as intended: The Activity Morning**

In the design of the Activity Morning unit, the parameters of a community of learners for vocational orientation are manifested in learning and instructional activities as follows. *Shared learning* is promoted by grouping the students and asking each group to present an activity on a worksheet that can be executed by all the groups with the primary school children during the event. This particular activity is organised to promote positive interdependence, a basic element of cooperative learning (Kagan, 1994). Far more than during the Coffee Morning unit, the
students are encouraged to make plans together, deliberate, supplement each other’s ideas, and provide feedback to each other. More than during the Coffee Morning unit, cooperative learning structures are incorporated into the unit to structure the interactions between the students.

**Meaningful learning** is realised in the design by telling the students when the lessons begin that they will organise an event for children at a primary school. The students are shown a video that contains impressions of the particular school, the teachers, and the children in grades 1 and 2. The groups also are assigned ‘their’ children, which allows the students to adopt the role of a primary school teacher, learn about the children, and feel responsible for successfully carrying out an event at the school. The opportunity for the students to decide on activities to undertake with the children also aims to encourage meaningful learning. The teachers provide guidelines for these activities. The class then decides which of the proposed activities to perform at the primary school.

**Reflective learning** is stimulated by asking students to provide feedback on each other’s activities concerning the activity’s suitability for the children, the clarity of the steps of the activity, and the necessary materials. This feedback is used to make a final version of each worksheet. Moreover, the students reflect on the competences that they should develop to present the event properly, using the Think, Pair, Share strategy (Kagan, 1994). The activity aims to encourage the students to reflect on whether working with children suits them and on the necessary knowledge, skills, and professional attitude for this work.

A focus on **transferable learning outcomes** is promoted by the organisation of the series of lessons. The activities are practiced by role playing with classmates and are later performed with the primary school children. During the curriculum unit, the teachers constantly note the reasons why the activities should be done in a certain way.

**Evaluation of the Activity Morning Unit**

**Evaluation of the design process**

How did the teachers collaborate with the school leader and researchers in developing curriculum units that would foster communities of learners for vocational orientation? The researcher encouraged the teachers to work systematically by creating a lesson plan and focusing on the learning goals and incorporating the parameters for communities of learners earlier in the design process. Although the researcher’s guidance did structure the teachers’ activities at the beginning of the design period, when they started feeling time pressure, they eventually abandoned this plan. Moreover, during the Activity Morning design process, the teachers and the researcher still did not share the goal of designing learning environments that foster a community of learners for vocational orientation. Addressing the parameters in the design was the researcher’s goal, and this remained her task. This goal was clearly less meaningful to the teachers. The teachers easily discarded elements of the design that reflected the community of learners concept, even after experiencing the value of the elements during the Coffee Morning unit. The teachers’ main aim remained designing activities that the students would enjoy. The researcher’s evaluations with the teachers after implementing the Activity Morning unit presented a proper moment for the teachers to reflect on the designed curriculum unit and the process of designing the unit. Nevertheless, they indicated that the evaluations were of more interest to the researcher than to themselves.

The school leader tried to encourage the teachers to reflect on their design activities for the Activity Morning unit during the joint meetings. By asking the teachers to present the Coffee Morning unit to the team, he provided the teachers with an audience (meaningful context) to present their work as a good practice, and he encouraged the teachers to reflect on the process
because preparing the presentation required thorough reflection. For the teachers, however, the presentation concerned only an accidental circumstance that demanded substantial time. Although the presentation provided an opportunity for shared, meaningful, and reflective learning for the teachers, they did not appreciate the value of this opportunity. The presentation of the Coffee Morning unit was more meaningful to the school leader than to the teachers. In sum, regarding the first research question (concerning the process of developing curriculum units), we concluded that the input and structure that the researcher provided during the Activity Morning design process did not substantially affect how the teachers designed the activities or how they approached designing the activities. Moreover, we concluded that the researcher’s and school leader’s actions did not fundamentally affect how the teachers viewed the parameters of a community of learners for vocational orientation. The teachers were not focused on their own learning processes, no matter how explicitly the researcher and the school leader attempted to facilitate their learning.

**Evaluation of the implemented curriculum unit**

We now discuss the second research question, ‘Did the implemented Activity Morning unit promote student learning in the intended shared, meaningful, reflective, and transfer-oriented way?’, for each parameter.

*Shared learning* was promoted using principles of cooperative learning. The students created an activity on a worksheet for the rest of their classmates, and the class selected activities that seemed suitable for the primary school children; however, because of a lack of time, the theoretical knowledge that the students’ learned was not applied to the selected activities. As a result, an exchange of information between students did not occur. We concluded that although the design of the curriculum unit did incorporate principles of cooperative learning to promote shared learning, the shared learning of the students was different from what was intended.

*Meaningful learning* was promoted via the video clips of the primary school children in their school and the freedom the students were given to select their own activity to undertake with the children. The students were enthusiastic about and interested in the video clips of the children (‘Boy, they are active!’), whereas they were less interested in the clips of the primary school environment. As a result, the students developed an image of the target group but were not able to get an idea of the opportunities that the primary school environment offered for possible activities. The teachers concluded that they would guide the students through the video clips next time (e.g., by making remarks such as ‘Look, there is a small stage that you may use for activities’). The students appreciated the freedom to choose activities, even though the activities had to meet certain criteria. Giving the teachers less control and the students more control over the activities is a learning point for designing future curriculum units.

*Reflective learning* was expected to occur, as the students gave feedback on the worksheets of other groups and the other groups’ competences. Some of the groups, however, did not revise their worksheet on basis of the received feedback. The worksheets did not seem important to the students during the event because they had already spent so much time discussing one another’s activities. Student competence was strongly improved in the Activity Morning unit compared with the Coffee Morning unit. Because the students had to think about which competences they had to develop for the event, more reflection occurred. Still, the students found it difficult to convince their classmates of their own competences. They did not clearly appear to think about whether working with children would suit them. It was concluded that the design of future curriculum units should focus on the following aspects: providing more freedom concerning how the students should utilise feedback, stimulating reflection by letting the students think about the competences they need to develop, and carrying out the unit with a focus on the event itself rather than ‘working with children’ in general.
The focus on *transferable learning* outcomes was grounded in the organisational composition pertaining to selecting activities, practicing with classmates, and executing the activity with the target group, followed by an evaluation. The students handled themselves well at the school site during the event and interacted in properly with the children. Still, the students were not continually oriented to the tasks of selecting activities and practicing with their classmates during the lessons, as they thought they would manage fine without preparation. We concluded that the design of future curriculum units should focus on the following aspects: elaborating on the proper application of instructional methods in the context of practicing activities with classmates, involving students more in preparing for the event, and providing examples of situations in which performing activities would be more difficult (for example, role playing in which they have to deal with shy or hyperactive children).

6. Discussion

In this chapter, we examined how researchers, teachers, and a school leader designed and implemented a learning environment aimed at fostering a community of learners in pre-vocational education, using a conceptual framework consisting of four parameters (shared, meaningful, reflective, and transfer-oriented learning) as a point of departure. Two curriculum units were developed and implemented: the Coffee Morning unit and the Activity Morning unit. Our research questions focused on the way the teachers collaborated with the school leader and researchers during the process of developing curriculum units and on whether the implemented curriculum units promoted student learning as intended.

Regarding the first question, we conclude that teachers were actively involved in the process of designing and implementing the curriculum units. Nevertheless, the teachers did not appreciate the value of the community of learners for vocational orientation. During both design cycles, the teachers paid considerable attention to the organisational aspects of the units (who, what, where, and when). Moreover, they only focused on learning goals, learning content, instructional methods, and assessments, after the organisational matters were settled. Keeping the teachers focused on the parameters of a community of learners for vocational orientation remained the responsibility of the researcher. Relating the parameters and the developed curriculum units to the school’s vision regarding teaching and learning and reflecting on possibilities for transferring the lessons learned to other curriculum units only occurred when the school leader encouraged such reflection.

In retrospect, we can wonder whether the participants truly had a shared goal in this design research. Although the teachers, the school leader, and the researcher agreed to collaborate in fostering communities of learners for vocational orientation, they each pursued their own goals. For the teachers, the main focus was on designing activities that the students would enjoy, while the school leader’s focus concerned school development and disseminating innovative learning practices in the school, and the researcher was interested in investigating the use of communities of learners to enhance students’ quality of and engagement in learning. Realising so many different goals at such different levels may have been too ambitious for a two-year project. Additionally, because the researcher, who developed the idea of fostering communities of learners, initiated the project, teachers’ appreciation of the communities of learners concept had to be developed during the process. Finally, the collaboration method used in the design research was not a regular practice in the school. As a result, the teachers did not reflect on the process together (make plans, provide colleagues with feedback, and reflect on how what they were doing was in line with the school’s vision regarding teaching and learning).

We believe that these problems would be typical of collaborations between researchers, teachers, and school leaders but that being more explicit about the roles expected from the
participants and allowing more time for the design process may mitigate some of these issues. Participating in a design research study requires more than teachers’ motivation to participate. Researchers should be aware that structured and conceptual reasoning are academic skills that are not self-evidently developed by teachers. It seems advisable to help teachers to draw on and develop these skills. Additionally, time is needed to develop a shared conception of the starting points for developing curriculum units. A fruitful design process is only possible when these starting points fit the school’s vision and when that vision is elaborated and applied by not only the school leader but also the individual teachers involved. In addition, engaging teachers in the context and problem analysis phase of a design research study, i.e., the first instead of the third phase, may help the development team to arrive at a shared conception of the goals of and the starting points for developing curriculum units.

Regarding our second research question, we conclude that with the second curriculum unit (Activity Morning), we were better able to promote student learning as intended than with the first (Coffee Morning). The parameters were better manifested in the design of the Activity Morning unit than in that of the Coffee Morning unit. Shared learning, for example, was more clearly present because approved cooperative learning instructional methods were incorporated in the design. Regarding meaningful learning, the design allowed the students to gain a much better understanding of the target group (primary school children), thus facilitating the students’ ability to assume the professional role of a primary school teacher assistant. In the second unit, having the students think in advance about which competencies they would have to develop for the event and use this information for reflection afterward made the reflection on what was learned more meaningful to the students.

All evaluations during the design research study yielded new suggestions for improvement. For example, a tentative heuristic for meaningful learning, derived from the conceptual framework, was to ‘have students participate in an authentic (‘real’) vocational activity’. This tentative heuristic was incorporated in the design of the Coffee Morning unit by having students prepare for and eventually accompany and support elderly people during diversional activities. As this did engage students in meaningful learning during the event with the elderly, but not during the preparatory lessons, we adjusted the heuristic to ‘help student understand how to prepare for and establish an authentic vocational activity’. This heuristic was subsequently incorporated in the Activity Morning unit by introducing the school children to the students at the start of the unit. This design increased the students’ meaningful learning, but as the teachers largely controlled the preparatory lessons, the students were unable to effectively adopt the professional role of a primary school teacher assistant. Therefore, the heuristic was adjusted once again to ‘help students understand how to prepare for and establish an authentic vocational activity and take the lead in doing so’. Thus, the collaboration with the teachers and school leader enabled us as researchers to refine and elaborate the tentative heuristics that we started out with.

In conclusion, despite the challenges we encountered, we believe that we were able to elaborate the community of learners concept in a way that is useful for prevocational secondary education. The collaboration between researcher, teachers, and a school leader resulted in ecologically valid designs and elaborated heuristics. Additionally, the curriculum units appeared effective in enhancing students’ quality of learning and engagement (we report on this summative evaluation elsewhere: Boersma, Ten Dam, Wardekker, & Volman, in preparation). Although we are uncertain of the extent to which the community of learners concept and the parameters were meaningful to the teachers, several years after our design research, the effects of the project appear to have taken root in the school. The success of the curriculum
units developed in the context of our design research motivated the teachers to continue these kinds of projects. The Coffee Morning and Activity Morning have become part of the regular curriculum of the school, and similar units for the 10th grade curriculum were developed and implemented by the teachers.

**Key sources**


Boersma, A., Ten Dam, G., Wardekker, W., & Volman, M. *Communities of learners for students in initial vocational education. How teachers, researchers, professionals and students shape learning*. Manuscript in preparation.


**References**


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