Stimulating Learning Conversations

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Professional learning communities generate the continuous learning culture needed by schools in the 21st century. And they can make a real difference. Where they persistently focus on improving learning and teaching, they improve teachers' practice and students' learning. Professional learning communities may take the form of individual schools, groups of schools – also known as learning networks or networked learning communities – groups of teachers or school leaders. They operate within and across boundaries, and are characterised by an inclusive, collaborative and inquiry-oriented approach to learning new and better ways to help them enhance learning opportunities and outcomes for all students. In essence, they are voracious social learners.

I’ve been studying and supporting the development of professional learning communities and learning networks for some years. And I’ve been following related interests in designing and evaluating leadership learning, and finding ways to help educators and policy makers learn from and make use of research findings. These routes have all led me to the same destination: learning conversations. How? All of my work has focused on how people learn and change when they are together. So social learning comes into play, and one of the key means you have to communicate with each other is through conversation. Before I describe what I mean by learning conversations, I want to look a bit more closely why social learning is important.

Why social learning?

It’s a myth that intelligence is just an individual concept. Thinking interdependently, being able to work and learn well with other people and learning from and with others is a habit of an intelligent mind. Learning with and from others isn’t just enjoyable; it’s a natural way to learn. Most people don’t need persuading that connecting is central to their lives. Social networking is now a norm for many of us. An increasing number of readers of this paper will have ‘grown up digital’; in other words, “digital technology is no more intimidating than a VCR or toaster”. The Net Generation are
natural collaborators, staying in touch on Blackberrys or mobile phones wherever they are. And as employees, Don Tapscott and colleagues’ research found, Net Geners want to work hand-in-hand with colleagues to create better goods and services, design products, influence decisions and improve work processes. But, although social-networking sites help people to connect, they don’t produce collective intelligence. So, how can the energy of people’s natural desire to collaborate best be harnessed into learning power – collaborating with others, learning with and from them, to achieve both personal and collective goals? How can leaders ‘socialise with intent’ to achieve personal growth and ‘collective efficacy’ – “a group’s shared belief and confidence that it can achieve its desired goal”?

Many avenues are available to choose to suit different purposes; for example, peer coaching, action learning sets, collaborative forms of enquiry, reading groups, online communities, going on learning walks and reviews in each others’ schools, to name a few. Conversation is critical to all of these – it’s the means by which connections are made in these activities.

Learning conversations

When I refer to learning conversations, I am thinking of them as the way that educators make meaning together and jointly come up with new insights and knowledge that lead to intentional change to enhance their practice and student learning. Exploring new ideas and evidence, participants offer diverse perspectives, challenge each other in respectful ways, and are open to being honest and pushing themselves to reflect deeply in ways that challenge their thinking.

These are features I consider characteristic of high quality learning conversations between adults.

Purpose and process

Focus on evidence and/or ideas – Learning conversations are focused. The specific focus may reflect one of two important perspectives. The first is informed by evidence: the conversation’s focus arises out of evidence from practice or about strong practice. For example, discussing research on learner engagement or examining evidence and thinking what it means in a particular context. The second reflects ideas about innovation and transformation where, for example, the conversation explores creative ways to engage learners and extend learning. Some conversations weave these two perspectives together. Both require all those participating in the conversation to be committed to the focus. In organisations, when people in groups draw on
evidence and other outside knowledge and combine it with their own tacit knowledge as they respond to real problems, they often come up with innovative solutions.\textsuperscript{11}

**Experience and external knowledge/theory** – Access to outside expertise deepens learning conversations. Syntheses of evidence on professional learning that makes a difference to teachers’ practice and students’ learning emphasise the importance of involving external expertise.\textsuperscript{12} Whether delivered personally, through their writing, or via other media, independent ideas are injected to stimulate reflection, challenge the status quo and extend thinking. Combining people’s own knowledge with outside knowledge makes for powerful conversations that can stimulate valuable new knowledge.\textsuperscript{13}

**Protocols and tools** – Learning conversations can often be framed more clearly when supported by frameworks and guidelines that can help participants structure the dialogue and interrogate evidence or ideas. Such protocols are also based on Vygotskian thinking that the knowledge we possess is inextricably bound up with our tools, resources and collaborators. Such protocols can be used to help leaders create and develop professional learning communities by engaging in conversations around learning and teaching, and exploring together what they are learning that is most critical to success.\textsuperscript{14} Much of my recent work has been involved in designing different kinds of research-based protocols and tools aiming to stimulate learning conversations that lead to deep learning and production of innovative ideas that help support development of people’s practice.\textsuperscript{15} It’s important, though, to ensure that protocol-based conversations don’t become formulaic in which the process takes precedence over the substance.\textsuperscript{16}

**Facilitation** – Facilitation isn’t the same as external expertise. It can come from inside or outside the group, but it’s needed to elicit and support intellectual exchange, as well as maintaining open dialogue\textsuperscript{17} and, sometimes, injecting new energy into the conversation. Skilful facilitation can often lead to a productive balance of comfort and challenge.\textsuperscript{18}

**Participant engagement**

**Enquiry-mindedness** – Participants in learning conversations engage with an enquiry habit of mind.\textsuperscript{19} A habit of mind has been described as “a characteristic of what intelligent people do when they are confronted with problems, the resolutions of which are not immediately apparent”.\textsuperscript{20} In this case, participants enter the conversation with a spirit of curiosity; a ‘need to know’ even when what they find out may not fit with their existing beliefs. They are proactive about seeking out new evidence and ideas, and open to being challenged.
Respectful challenge – Trusting and mutually respectful relationships are the bedrock of successful professional learning communities. David Bohm, the physicist, argues that discussion avoids ‘undiscussables’ lying below the surface that block true and honest communication. Dialogue, by contrast, is more open, going beyond any individual’s understanding, encouraging members of a team to suspend assumptions so they can genuinely ‘think together’. Being respectful means listening attentively to others, a core feature of coaching relationships. Building positive relationship is an essential starting point for any substantive and critical exchange to take place. I use the word ‘critical’ in the same sense that it is used when talking about critical friendship. Here, the critical friend has your interests at heart but will challenge you. And that’s what happens in learning conversations – the quality of the relationship or sociability factor in online communities is important but so is the challenge – and educators aren’t very used to ‘pushing’ each other on their ideas and practices.

Risk taking – It may seem strange to suggest that learning conversations involve risk taking, but challenging others is not something we find easy to do, and being open to and even intentional about changing our practice (another feature of learning conversations) can be quite risky, taking us out of our comfort zone. People’s creativity is stimulated by responsible risk taking, even though when they find this hard to do. Learning conversations can also help people think through ‘what this will mean for me, for my students and my practice’.

Conversation that leads to change

Reflection that challenges thinking – Reflection is central to making meaning. Social constructivist theory proposes that learners, drawing on their prior knowledge and experience, make meaning of new information or problems through talk – sharing, challenging, negotiating and justifying ideas. Learning occurs in that dissonance – the uncomfortable space where we are faced with knowledge or ideas that just don’t fit with our experience of the way the world works. So, as people engage in conversations about what evidence means, they discover that ideas that they believe to be true don’t hold up when under scrutiny and this recognition is used as an opportunity to rethink what they know and do.

Knowledge creation – A key outcome of learning conversations is knowledge creation. This draws from organisational learning theory. The argument goes that talk between colleagues helps transform tacit knowledge (what we know but don’t articulate) into explicit knowledge and the social process involved helps create new shared knowledge; learning as creating something new. So, conversations that make presuppositions, ideas, beliefs and feelings explicit and available for exploration help to promote knowledge creation.
Intentional action: change in practice – Learning conversations lead somewhere. Dialogue is purposeful and intentional. Action is a goal. This doesn’t mean that this takes precedence over the depth of reflection, challenge and animated exchange. A deep learning conversation is both absorbing and energising in its possibilities. It may also be that further conversations are needed before changes are made, or individuals agree to seek out further knowledge outside of the conversation. But, there is underlying commitment that the new learning will be applied in some way to help enhance students’ learning in line with the professional learning community principle of collective responsibility.28

What else is needed to support learning conversations?

The serious business of learning conversations needs support. Effective professional learning communities provide these conditions.

Culture of trust and enquiry – trust, a critical and often overlooked element of organisational culture29 is fundamental to the success of professional learning communities and what enables the hard effort of true collegiality to take place. This is both trust between teachers and between teachers and senior leaders, without which risks aren’t taken. The enquiry-mindedness of individuals is also much more likely to be engendered in the wider culture of enquiry that pervades deeper learning communities and networks.30

Diverse perspectives – Learning conversations are enriched by diverse exchanges. A community can get caught up in ‘group-think’, which is the antithesis of learning community. Diverse viewpoints are vital to learning communities31 and to collective intelligence.32 Learning communities have to keep challenging themselves and, where necessary, invite outsiders to act as critical friends and help push their thinking further. As Charles Leadbeater33 argues in his book WE-THINK, in most fields “creativity emerges when people with different vantage points, skills and know-how combine their ideas to produce something new”. Differences can drive learning.

Time and space – Learning conversations need time and space. Finding time for learning is often a challenge34; even more so when more than two or more people are involved. But creating time for learning conversations is important. They don’t always have to be face-to-face. Virtual learning conversations allow more flexibility around time – ‘hotseats’ offered by some leadership websites and online conferences are two examples using asynchronous communication – the stimulus is there for you to respond to, and you communicate when it suits you. Online discussions are also stored so that you can follow the thread of the conversation – and also analyse it for the quality of the dialogue!35
Locations for learning conversations also need careful thought. To ensure equality between all learning partners in networks, learning conversations can be rotated around schools or held within neutral community locations such as coffee shops. In the 18th Century, coffee houses were seen as locations for stimulating and sociable conversations where everyone’s contributions were treated as equal. But, maybe the members of your learning community live far apart and connect virtually. Using the metaphor of a traditional conference to design virtual conferences for educational leaders, Joni Falk and colleagues designed an interactive poster hall where people could browse posters, find ones of most interest and have a conversation with the presenter, and a lounge to ‘go’ to discuss topics and send instant, online private messages to other participants. The disadvantage can be that virtual conversations lack the particular dynamic that comes from face-to-face exchange.

**Development of dialogic skills** – professional learning communities are locations for many development activities but attention to developing dialogic skills is not foremost amongst these. Dialogic skills enable participants to surface the ‘undiscussables’ conversation that block true and honest communication. Skills such as listening, questioning, challenging, probing, connecting and building support critical friendship, enabling members of a learning community to explore assumptions and develop shared meaning. Some of these skills can be honed through developing coaching relationships.

**Conclusion**

Lee Shulman, an eminent American academic, suggests that you can compare the complexity of teachers’ work with that of hospital emergency rooms. Making sense of this complexity, taking on board new knowledge about learning, and being willing to change your practice accordingly is hard work. Change is more likely to be meaningful and sustainable if it has been talked through. Learning conversations are the conduit for much of the collaborative activity of professional learning communities and learning networks. It’s important that they are deep and stimulating.

**Learning conversation self-evaluation questions**

Think of a learning conversation you have recently had eg you carried out a joint classroom observation and had a follow up conversation, you analysed some student work together etc. Here are some questions that have been designed to help people reflect together on your conversation. Each of the questions has been designed to capture an important aspect of learning conversations, based on research and theory about learning, effective professional
learning, professional learning conversations, effective professional learning communities, dialogue, and cultures of improvement, as described earlier in this paper. Their aim is to help stimulate more powerful learning conversations in the future. Select a couple of the questions each. Make notes on the key points and anything you want to follow up.

1. To what extent do you judge the conversation you had actually to be a learning conversation, based on the features outlined? Did you even have one?
2. What has having this conversation helped you to achieve that you couldn't have achieved on your own?
3. What value was there in considering alternative ways of doing and seeing things?
4. When do you think you were at your most reflective during the conversation?
5. Did anything come up in the conversation that made you rethink how you feel or what you believe about something important to you?
6. What risk(s) did you take in this conversation?
7. How did you come to agreement about the meaning of the evidence that you were discussing?
8. What did you discuss that pushed you to think really hard?
9. Did you have insights during the conversation about learning and teaching of a specific subject?
10. How did you challenge each other without causing offence?
11. If you were starting this conversation again, how might you have got more learning out of it?

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Notes and references

I am using learning in its broadest sense as used by Jacques Delors and colleagues in Learning: The Treasure Within. UNESCO – that is learning to know, to do, to live together. I am also bearing in mind the New Kinds of Smart Bill Lucas and Guy Claxton argue are needed in today’s world (see note 4 for reference).


Of course, learning conversations between students and between teachers and students are equally important, although they are not the subject of this paper.


See note 16.


36 See previous note.