

Conversations to Change Teaching

**CRITICAL PRACTICE IN
HIGHER EDUCATION**

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank colleagues and students who have worked with us, and have had conversations with us, over many years and who have helped to develop our thinking and practice. We thank the anonymous book proposal reviewers, particularly the one who commented that there was no point in writing this book, as no one has time for conversations in universities anymore. This helped us to focus on being both aspirational and realistic. Thank you to colleagues who read drafts of the text: Claire Dickerson, Angela Hammond, Karen Smith and Amanda Roberts. Finally we acknowledge our debt to Sally Graham who was an inspirational colleague. The influence of her 'conversations to change teaching' continues in the lives of so many.

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Conversations to Change Teaching

Joy Jarvis and Karen Clark

Series Editors: Joy Jarvis and Karen Smith

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Meet the authors and series editors



Karen Clark is Programme Leader of a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education at the University of Hertfordshire, which attracts colleagues from every academic school at the institution. She is engaged with a range of work involving professional learning and recognition, curriculum development and staff–student collaboration. She draws on conversations about teaching both formal and informal in many different contexts from peer review, programme development and teaching observation to lunch groups and chats fuelled by coffee and cake.



Joy Jarvis is currently Professor of Educational Practice at the University of Hertfordshire and a UK National Teaching Fellow. She has experience in a wide range of education contexts and works to create effective learning experiences for students and colleagues. She is particularly interested in the professional learning of those engaged in educational practice in higher education settings and has undertaken a range of projects, working with colleagues locally, nationally and internationally, to develop practice in teaching and leadership of teaching. Joy works with doctoral students exploring aspects of educational practice and encourages them to be adventurous in their methodological approaches and to share their findings in a range of contexts to enable practice change.



Karen Smith is Reader in Higher Education in the School of Education at the University of Hertfordshire. She has a strong research interest in transnational education, notably in flying faculty models and is author of the *Transnational Education Toolkit* for the Higher Education Academy. Karen spent many years working on lecturer development programmes and is now the Director of the University of Hertfordshire's Professional Doctorate in Education. Karen also leads collaborative research and development in her School, where she engages in externally funded research and evaluation and supports the development of scholarly educational practice through practitioner research.

Book summary

We believe that conversations have the power to change teaching in higher education at individual, group and institutional levels. We have written this book to share our ideas, drawn from our own practice and building on the work of others, to show how this might be achieved. We argue that conversation undertaken purposefully is a professional learning tool that can be available to all. We appreciate that the current context may not be conducive to conversation, so we aim to show how it can be built into everyday work practices. We hope that academics new to teaching, their more experienced colleagues and institutional leaders of teaching will find the ideas for practice useful and that the book can be a focus for conversation that will lead to change.

Why this book?

The authors of this book work to facilitate the development of staff learning about teaching in a university. Joy comes from an education background, is a National Teaching Fellow and in her role as Professor of Educational Practice works in a range of informal ways with staff from different disciplines to share ideas and approaches to teaching. Karen has a background in teaching law and is a member of a central team which offers a number of opportunities for professional learning for academic staff across the university, including a postgraduate programme, a professional recognition scheme and a variety of workshops. We have worked together during the past ten years to structure opportunities for conversation between academic staff members with the purpose of changing practice. We have learned a great deal about the processes and the challenges involved.

We decided to write this book together because we believe that talk about university teaching has the potential to change the lives of students, staff and institutions and that currently it is undervalued and underused. Metrics, target-setting and performance measures mean the focus of conversation can struggle to get beyond procedures and organisation. Increasingly complex academic roles, work pressures and job insecurity encourage the idea that talking about teaching is really only for those with specific management roles for education. Academic communities working under pressure do not prioritise ways to develop and embed disciplinary learning practices together.

In this book, we aim to raise the profile of conversation and its potential for bringing about change in the way teaching is thought about and undertaken. We will draw on our own experience and research along with examples of practice from a range of different institutions.

We argue that conversation is an essential activity for both individual and institutional well-being and effectiveness. It is a powerful, underappreciated and often unexplored tool within the reach of all. The ubiquity of talk can distract from the significance of purposeful, deliberate conversation which might be used to chip away at the very obstacles which appear to squeeze it from our professional lives.

Stimulating dialogue in both formal and informal settings can combat the isolation which often characterises university teaching practice, can enable us to reach effective

collegiate responses to complex and evolving challenges, and has the potential to restore value to some of those processes which can all too easily slide into hollow bureaucracy.

Talking about our teaching enables us to articulate what we value and how that plays out in the lecture hall, seminar room, laboratory or studio. We argue that valuable conversation with colleagues can still be achieved in our congested working lives and that developing the skills to make the most of every opportunity can make an important contribution to the robustness of university teaching in an increasingly demanding environment. The key question we ask in this book is ‘how can we use conversation to change teaching?’

Why conversation?

Conversation happens so frequently that we hardly notice it. However, it can have powerful and long-lasting effects. In this book, we explore ways of having conversations about teaching that can influence us, our colleagues and institutions. For this to happen we need space, though not always much, as brief corridor conversations can have a big impact (Haig, 2006). Indeed, most of us can probably recall conferences and meetings when we felt that the most learning happened in moments of chat over coffee, outside the formal structure of the sessions. A feature of the type of conversations we are proposing is a level of informality that flattens power relations and enables people to make meaning together. It is about people trying to make sense of an issue, drawing from their experience and knowledge of the field. It involves listening to the ideas of others, trying to articulate our own thoughts and building towards some form of agreement on the topic – even if that is to agree to differ.

When our diaries are packed, informal routine conversations with teaching peers seem to be a luxury: ‘there’s no time for coffee these days’. However, we argue that it is vital to protect such interactions. Anecdotes and stories about classroom events that are often told on these occasions can build greater understanding of participants’ practice and the thinking that underpins it. In fact, we would argue that this shared professional learning also makes us more efficient when it comes to deliberation in more formal contexts such as planning meetings and programme review. Far from being a waste of time, it ensures we make the best of it.

The term ‘conversation’ has been used in a range of ways by writers exploring its use. Senge (1990, p 9), for example, talks about ‘learningful’ conversations *‘that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others’*. This approach involves the use of dialogue, again a concept used in different ways, but here we draw particularly on the

ideas of Bohm (1996). He distinguishes dialogue from discussion, in which people identify and analyse their own views and try to 'win the game'. Discussion can then move on to negotiation, where individual positions are held less strongly and this can be a preliminary stage in dialogue. Dialogue itself involves '*opening up judgements and assumptions*' (Bohm, 1996, p 46) so that something new can form in the space in between. At this stage participants can stand back from their own assumptions, identify them, recognise the personal and cultural influences that informed them and then create something new in relation to the topic. Teaching approaches, curricula and a whole range of practice developments can then be created, for as Zeldin notes (1998, p 14), '*when minds meet they don't just exchange facts; they transform them, draw implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards; it creates new cards.*' These 'new cards' could include an idea for a session, a change in assessment strategy or a completely new way of seeing practice. Conversations like this involve people thinking together, or 'interthinking' (Littleton and Mercer, 2013, p 26), with the potential of creating '*a new kind of understanding that neither could have achieved alone*'.

Conversation can help evolve individual practice, it can contribute to professional ways of working within disciplinary teams and it can fuel reflection and stimulate change around accepted assumptions across an institution. We argue that its goal should be this disruption of individual, group and institutional ways of thinking and acting. Here the term disruption is used '*in the sense of adopting a stance of questioning, challenging and critiquing taken-for-granted ways of doing things in higher education*' (Quinn, 2012, p 1). Such disturbance could be seen as a problem where there is a very hierarchical management of teaching. We explore this and other challenges of leading change through a conversational approach throughout the book and particularly in the final chapter.

Conversation requires attention as well as talking, and we will consider examples of listening and questioning strategies to enable effective dialogue. Any exchange can be derailed or limited by power, status or unexplored and conflicting conceptions of how teaching quality might be identified; we explore different approaches to reduce the impact of these factors.

We look at different ways to equip ourselves for conversations that can prompt change. We argue that participants must be prepared in terms of personal communication skills, subject knowledge and an understanding of different contexts. We must also be able to identify and willing to seize conversational opportunities, including those that happen as part of normal practice, such as peer review, staff induction, professional recognition procedures or the daily organisation of teaching. We explore ways we have worked in groups to sustain conversations over time and raise questions about

what it means to lead through this type of dialogue. Above all, we aim to identify why it is important to talk about teaching and what can happen if we do.

Why talk about teaching?

Conversation about teaching in higher education sometimes does not get beyond discussion of organisation, timetables and procedures, all of which are important but are part of the systems around teaching rather than the core of practice. At the centre of teaching is the purpose and process of student learning, and it is talk about this with which we are concerned. Disciplinary knowledge, professional standards, technology, procedures and views of education continually change the setting in which we teach, so we must be both proactive and responsive. This requires us to take an ‘inquiry stance’ (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009), exploring our professional and personal knowledge, practices and values. We must both keep up-to-date in relation to our discipline or profession and pay attention to what is happening in the classroom and to learners’ development. But more than this, we need to adopt a disposition to question our teaching. Conversations can help – sharing relevant research findings and other evidence and considering how it fits within our own practice.

We take it as given that teaching is neither straightforward nor common sense, two descriptions sometimes given to the process. As Cochran-Smith (2004, p 298) identifies, teaching is *‘an intellectual, cultural, and contextual activity that requires skilful decisions about how to convey subject matter knowledge, apply pedagogical skills, develop human relationships and both generate and utilize local knowledge’*.

As disciplinary experts or professional teachers we will have understandings, assumptions, values and ways of acting that have become part of who we are in the classroom. Much of this may be held tacitly (Eraut, 2000) and conversations within and beyond our discipline can help to ‘unpack’ what we know, which in turn can enable us to make these things explicit to students (Schön, 1987). Conversations with those outside our field are particularly useful at illuminating differing assumptions. However, dialogue with our disciplinary peers is essential to elicit the ways of teaching and learning in a particular field. This is known as ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ (Shulman, 2004) and is central to disciplinary teaching. As Kreber (2009, p 28) notes: *‘Reflection on pedagogical content knowledge encourages faculty to explore why, within their own departments, teaching is approached in a particular way’*.

In this text we also consider how talking with students about their learning, as opposed to merely gathering data from satisfaction surveys, is invaluable. It can enable insight into different perspectives, a greater shared understanding of why

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