



Teacher talk and open learning spaces

Jane Jones writes about Teacher Talk – teachers talking about teaching and learning; lesson sharing; creating dialogic spaces; and engaging in meaningful conversation. She shows how Teacher Talk lies at the heart of powerful professional development.

Introduction: teachers talking

It is, they say, good to talk. Teachers always have plenty of things to talk about. Some of the best and most fruitful talk takes place in spontaneous, unplanned and unstructured ways and this, in my experience, is very much the case for teachers. Over the years, I recall memorable learning conversations in the form of staffroom debates, a passing question and answer session on the stairs, exciting exchanges in the photocopy room or the ladies, not to mention those glorious Friday night pub trips putting the world of education to right. Many an insight has been gleaned, many a suggestion made (and acted upon) and

many an important question raised in such conversations. Danielson (2009:1) calls these '*rich conversations about practice*' and asserts that '*professional conversations are an essential technique to promote professional learning*' (p11). Furthermore, conversations that generate 'teacher talk' have the potential to be influential and meaningful staff development in providing a platform for knowledge-creation and sharing. Ayers (2001:1) reporting on the 'Teacher Talk' professional development project sponsored by the John Hopkins School of Education in Baltimore, argues that self-directed teacher talk is a crucial way of improving teaching:



‘The message of TEACHER TALK is that the people with the problems are also the people with the solutions, and that only the self-activity of teachers can, in the end, improve teaching in any fundamental or sustained way. TEACHER TALK unlocks the tacit knowledge of teachers, makes that knowledge public and shared, and therefore subject to deliberate and thoughtful change. TEACHER TALK is a form of voluntary peer staff development and can be conceived as teacher action research, formal teacher reflection, sustained appreciative inquiry.’

A key point here is a reminder that change and improvement only ever come about through the actions of teachers in their classrooms, and never through mandated change or reform directives. Put positively, teachers have the potential to take agency to ‘make a difference’ (see also Durrant, 2014 for an extended discussion of teacher agency).

Lesson sharing: an exploratory and expansive dialogue and a meaningful conversation

In this discussion, it is the aspect of ‘peer staff development’ that I am interested to explore and I link this to the practice of lesson sharing, although teacher talk could be related to a great many other points of focus. Although related in some respects to lesson observation, what I am referring to is absolutely not lesson observation of the often zero-value rated top-down, managerial kind but lesson sharing that is informal, invitational and reciprocal. I personally have always enjoyed having student teachers in my lessons, and was lucky enough to work in schools where the doors were left open and where we teachers could wander into each other’s rooms and stay a while if we wanted. Teachers have much to learn from each other in their personal classroom contexts and their ‘knowledge environments’. It is the concept of two way learning that is at the heart of a culture of collaborative professional learning that includes lesson sharing. The axes of learning run in several directions, allowing, for example, new teachers to watch more experienced ones as well as the more experienced teachers to learn from the fresh ideas of the student teacher or the newly qualified teacher. Teachers of one subject can learn from colleagues teaching different subjects. The combinations are endless. Most teachers would agree that it is fascinating to see what goes on in a colleague’s classroom and how the pupils interact and learn; it appeals to one’s professional curiosity. Brighouse and Woods assert that: *‘Teachers are natural researchers, in the sense that all teaching is based on inquiry and the response of the pupils provides ready evidence as to the effectiveness of various teaching and learning approaches’* (1999:42). Lesson sharing moves teachers in the direction of working as co-researchers to challenge, question, find confirmation of or difference between how we all theorize, or ‘explain’, our practice. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993 :15) write: *“an important part of the teachers’ learning experience and crucially, an opportunity to play a role in generating a knowledge base ‘inside-out’... emanating from neither theory nor practice alone but from critical reflection on the intersection of the two”*.



Wegerif (2015) makes a point that is relevant here about opening a ‘dialogic space’ with regard to critical reflection. In line with his reasoning (about promoting pupil talk but with certain transfer to teacher talk), teacher talk would open a space for dialogue with open questions, deepen it in questioning assumptions and expand it in introducing new voices and perspectives. Danielson (2009:6) specifies the role of ‘the other’ in a similar way defining it as ‘*critical... the mirror, sounding board, the sympathetic (and indeed sometimes challenging) voice*’. As such, the ‘space’ is widened to include joint knowledge construction, bringing in ideas from others and challenging (always ‘respectfully’ as Stoll, 2012, argues in an article on a similar topic) our own practices.

Teacher Talk scenarios

I now share some examples of ‘talk sessions’ that have framed lesson sharing that have taken place in the last year. We do a great deal of lesson sharing in the University setting, and always because we want to and are interested to learn from each other and from the students. First up is a three-way lesson sharing experience.

1. Ménage à trois

In our Department, we are required to undertake some ‘peer observation’. What is liberating is that we

are allowed to negotiate what we observe, with whom and when. The only requirement is to submit a brief ‘learning reflection’ to the Departmental Teaching and Learning coordinator. On the last occasion, three of us decided to work together, two Computer Studies (CS) tutors and one Linguist, observing classes of trainees in their subject work to get a feel for how the trainees experienced the learning through different subject lenses. The classes could not, at first sight, have been more different. The CS classes had the students around the room edges on PCs. The students were discussing a set of issues about pupil learning and assessment in an online chat. The language students were in noisy café-style groups discussing similar issues, creating posters as summaries of points and sharing one laptop per group to record key points. We all sat in with the students and chatted to them.

In post-lesson sharing discussion, we tutors discussed subject sub-cultural differences and practices and considered how there might be scope for each of us to extend our repertoires of teaching. We were forcibly reminded of how it must feel for secondary pupils to go from subject to subject with different teachers, teaching and learning experiences: not necessarily a bad thing but certainly different. We decided as a result to timetable the two sets of students, CS and Languages, to buddy up and come into each other’s classes, to ‘see’ other styles

of teaching and to do their own sharing about lessons they themselves had taught, resources etc and, finally, to peer coach in each other's specialisms. This was very successful. What an idea that would be to allow school students to observe other teachers' lessons and see how their peers get taught! And why not on a modest scale especially where there is parallel teaching? The 'pupil voice' agenda has become rather stuck in a rut of very limited 'consultation' or routine feedback and this suggestion would be a way to extend pupil involvement and provide valuable feedback to teachers.

We all found the experience very rich and one colleague was quite emotional, declaring it had been the best learning experience in her career.

2. All in it together

Usually when a tutor visits a student teacher in school, there is a three-way discussion that includes the student and the student's mentor. There tends to be a bit of a hierarchical structure. In this case, two tutors and two mentors met in school to discuss some course and student issues. The talk was protracted. One of the mentors had to teach a lesson and invited us all to join her in the classroom and observe. So it was that the remaining three of us sat, perhaps unfortunately to begin with, in a row at the back like budgies on a perch. I personally never sit at the back - too visible and inspectorial - but at the side, with a group or even at the teacher's desk at the front. The mentor taught one of those quietly authoritative, seamless lessons in a completely relaxed atmosphere that comes with experience and real knowledge of and respect from the pupils. It was one of those lessons that I wished I was recording except we all know what happens when one is being recorded. We moved as unobtrusively as possible around the classroom and chatted to pupils about their learning and teaching preferences.

In discussion afterwards, we talked about the benefits of such calm lessons in terms of pupil learning in a 'non-stressy' and non-distracting environment, something the pupils themselves commented on. We considered how such quiet, focused and clearly orientated learning with pupils engaging quietly with each other and the quiet measured voice of the teacher engendered conditions

and behaviour for learning. We agreed that it is these kinds of lessons that trainees would find useful, as indeed would colleagues, and that henceforth the value of 'quiet learning' would be included in lesson discussion with student teachers about different types of lesson. We also decided that teachers should not feel under any pressure to do special 'performance lessons' when trainees are present. Of course nothing can replace experience but experience is good to share and very good for student teachers to see. It was, overall, excellent mentor and tutor collaborative training just to be able to pore over what had been going on in that lesson, compare what each of us had noticed and reflect on our own teaching.

3. Entente cordiale

Teacher talk time can extend beyond our own worlds and is increasingly the case with social networking that can involve global networking. My institutions takes part in EU exchanges and mobility schemes for staff and students. MFL trainees can spend part of their year teaching in schools abroad. Usually, a tutor visits on a kind of QA check visit and also to ensure the welfare of the trainee. We have, over the years, developed excellent mutually trusting relationships. On my most recent visit, the mentor in the Paris secondary school and I had a long pre-lesson chat generally about progress and a long conversation with the student teacher. It was noticeable how relaxed the staffroom atmosphere was and the impact this had on general teacher talk around a large central table. Colleagues came and went and chipped in to the ongoing conversation at the table and also to our conversation taking place in a corner. With a coffee machine permanently on the go, it was a bit like a talk-café. The student teacher found the relaxed atmosphere conducive to open conversation that she contrasted with a staffroom in England where she had felt a bit like an outsider and had had to endure some unhelpful feedback from a teacher in an all too public way.

We watched the lesson, the equivalent of Year 12. There was the heady mix of the French post-16 class, the students very laid back but attentive and respectful. As the focus was on student interactions, we scripted verbatim snatches of dialogue. The student teacher had learnt the art of French repartee (done in English)

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and taught a direct, unfussy but demanding lesson. Back in the staffroom (something I usually avoid for post-lesson observation discussion), we had another glorious conversation. We discussed student attitude, their learning, their excuses (one asked to leave the room for two minutes as he said he had bitten his tongue but I saw he had a quick look at his phone), the old fashioned room layout, the snatches of dialogue and then the differences between the two cultures of teaching and learning.

The student teacher had it in a nutshell, indeed in a diagram she had made comprising a series of rows of dots to make a pyramid shape and an inverted pyramid. The inverted pyramid was the English system of language

in that has developed spontaneously from a learning conversation and the 'rich talk' that arose. Most schools are connected in some way to schools in other countries and there is thus scope for schools to engage in at least virtual teacher talk and learning conversations through, for example, video-conferencing, Facetime and other social networking media, thus enjoying collaborative learning across cultures, of some urgency today.

In all cases, 'dialogic spaces' created by contrasting and different views were thoroughly explored. All the participants had equal voice and the conversations meet Ayres' criterion of 'voluntary peer staff development' that included, in the 3rd case, the induction of a new teacher into the community of practice.



teaching, building up from items of vocabulary to something more extended. The French system was the pyramid, a style of learning that starts with the language items in use in context, leading to deconstruction of the elements as necessary. We all explored our own teaching approaches and identified strengths and weaknesses. We invited critical and appreciative comment of each other. It was very stimulating, accompanied by very strong French coffee in permanent supply in the staffroom courtesy of the school

As I have to cut a long story short, these dots have spawned an unfunded project between three institutions, two schools, one English and one French, and two corresponding university training departments on exploring these two approaches with a view to involving the pupils in commenting on the teaching and learning. It is the only project I have become involved

Conclusion

Teachers often claim that they have no time to think, reflect or discuss. Stoll *et al.* (2003) emphasise the importance of creatively managing time as a structure and resource, embedding talk time into school planning and CPD, acknowledging the power and time-effectiveness of such time-management. Space too is important so that teachers can meet in appropriate surroundings, with the necessary equipment and resources. It is the duty of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and the T and L coordinators to create time that might include, for example, SLT covering for staff to enable such activity, since 'time' here is the only necessary resource.

Whilst Wegerif writes about the critical exploration of 'dialogic space', Smyth (1999:73) extols the

concept of ‘the dialogic school’ in which teachers have opportunities to: “*theorise and re-theorise what is going on, what works, how they know and how things might be done differently...and have feisty debates about alternatives*”?. One would expect nothing less than ‘feisty’ teacher talk that was critical and questioning, but always constructive: here there may need to be some discussion about conversation skills and protocols. Talk would, when appropriate, include good dollops of ‘whining’ (Ayres, 2001) at which teachers also excel and to which they have a special entitlement in order to cope with the many pressures engendered by school life, as mentioned earlier. Ayers describes a CPD network in the US focused on teacher talk where one colleague, acknowledging teachers’ need to let off steam and to ask awkward questions, factored in two minutes of “whine-time” prior to more structured ‘professional conversations’ on various classroom teaching topics. In the three case studies I have described, ample ‘whining’ took place about ‘the management’, structures and systems, reforms, expectations and resources; the usual shopping list of moans. It was most enjoyable and generated heated feelings and massive laughter.

A recent quasi-medical television programme claimed that ‘just talking’ was by far the best way to keep brain cells alive. Talking compared favourably to doing puzzles and learning to draw, useful though these are, in the effort to remain alert as one gets older. It could be said that the opportunity to chat, in conjunction as in this article with lesson sharing (but it could be some other focus/ ‘big question’), is not just useful professional development - and I am claiming that they are - but that teacher talk is also a question of wellbeing in taking on board, respecting and responding to teachers’ needs, interests and rhythms.

I finish by listing what I consider to be the factors that are essential to successful teacher talk, with lesson-sharing:

- Whole school commitment to purpose
- The lesson sharing is arranged and organised by the participants
- Reciprocal sharing, not top down, one-way arrangements of some kind, is in place
- The focus is on processes primarily, towards but not solely on outcomes
- It is about trying to understand the processes through the lens of a colleague, of ‘the other’
- It is about trying to get into the shoes of the learner
- The learners are involved in some way in the discussion
- The activity is focused and evaluative but not judgmental
- Feedback is formative, interrogative and constructive
- The activity requires careful listening and open-mindedness
- Teachers could be encouraged but not mandated to share their learning reflections with others in an appropriate forum
- Teachers need to feel relaxed and threat-free
- There is a culture of total trust.

Without trust, the above kind of informal learning - and it is a very powerful form of learning - is nigh impossible. Teachers need to be trusted to do some of their own CPD in informal ways as it is ‘*the ongoing personal relations which provide the cement*’, Maden and Hillman (1996) assert, in the development of teacher and organisational learning. In practice, sadly, teachers are given little time to talk about topics that are important to them with their colleagues and they can often be individuals in an institution rather than a community of professional learners. It is time to find time to talk and create spaces for talk to occur spontaneously.

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