
Talking About Teaching: Professional Conversations to Promote Teacher Learning

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The Complexity of Teaching

“After 30 years of doing such work, I have concluded that classroom teaching ... is perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species has ever invented. ..The only time a physician could possibly encounter a situation of comparable complexity would be in the emergency room of a hospital during or after a natural disaster”

Lee Shulman, *The Wisdom of Practice*

The Wisdom of Practice

Recall an occasion in which you, as a teacher, were engaged in a productive conversation about teaching. Who were you speaking to? What was the situation? What was the stated purpose of the discussion?

David Perkins on Conversation

“Your organization functions and grows through conversations. The quality of those conversations determines how smart your organization is.”

King Arthur's Round Table, 2002

Contributors to Professional Learning

- An environment of trust
- Self-assessment
- Reflection on practice
- Professional conversation
- A community of professional inquiry

“It’s all about the conversation”

Reflection on Trust

Consider your professional (and personal) relationships. What behavior contributes to a sense of trust? What makes you feel safe in the relationship?

The Basis of Trust

- Consistency
- Maintaining confidentiality
- Professional competence
- Admitting mistakes
- Protecting vulnerability

Opportunities for Professional Conversation

- Formal reflective conversations, following an observation, associated with performance appraisal, with an evaluator (a variation; a conversation with a mentor, in “preparation” for a formal observation)
- Coaching conversation, with mentors, peer coaches, or administrators
- Informal professional conversations, following an un-announced, “drop-in” observation

Conversation Skills

These are used in all three types of conversations

- Establishing rapport
- Active listening
- Linguistic skills:
 - paraphrasing
 - probing
 - clarifying
- Inviting thinking

Limitations of Feedback

- If one regards teaching as a cognitive activity, then the conversation must be about the *cognition*.
- Feedback as normally offered feels judgmental, even condescending, patronizing
- Meaningful conversations about teaching are centered on asking questions and solving problems, rather than on feedback. They convey professional respect.

Reflection

Consider the issue of feedback in professional conversations; to what extent do you agree that a reliance on feedback undermines professional respect?

Power and Leadership

- Teachers and administrators in schools hold unequal amounts of power
- In performance appraisal, the “buck” stops with the administrator, but even conversations associated with performance appraisal can emphasize self-assessment and reflection on practice
- Schools, as professional organizations, can (and should) create other models for the exercise of power and leadership

Power in a Professional Organization

“...the traditional hierarchy of the school is upset. It changes from a fixed form, with superintendents and principals at the top and teachers and students at the bottom, to one that is in flux. The only constant is that neither superintendents and principals nor teachers and students are at the apex; that position is reserved for the ideas ... “

Thomas Sergiovanni, Moral Leadership, 1992.

The “Big Ideas,” Grounded in Research

- The nature of learning:
 - it is done by the *learner*
 - involves active intellectual engagement
- The nature of student motivation:
 - the need for human connection
 - the drive for competence and mastery
 - the need for autonomy and choice
 - students’ intellectual curiosity
- The “entity” view of human intelligence

A Quote from John Dewey

“The child is already intensely active, and the question of education is the question of taking hold of his activities, of giving them direction. Through direction, through organized use, they tend toward valuable results, instead of scattering or being left to merely impulsive expression.”

John Dewey, “The School and Society,” 1900

Reflection

How could you, as an informal observer of classrooms, determine whether a teacher's decisions reflected an understanding of the "big ideas?" What would be the nature of what students are doing? Of the teacher-student interactions?

Engaging Activities and Assignments

- Students are answering a question or solving a problem
- Permit student choice and initiative
- Encourage depth rather than breadth
- Require student thinking
- Offer multiple levels of challenge
- Designed to be relevant and authentic

Informal Professional Conversations (following an informal observation)

- Purpose:
 - Engage teachers in problem-solving conversations about practice
- Topics for conversation:
 - Established initially by the administrator or mentor/coach
- Characteristics:
 - Flexible structure, depending on time available for conversations about practice
 - Collegial, focused on exploring teaching as decision-making

Topics for Informal Conversation

(clusters of components in the Framework for Teaching)

- Clarity of purpose
- A safe and challenging environment
- Intellectual rigor of student tasks/assignments
- Smooth organization and management
- Student assumption of responsibility
- Implementation of school/district initiatives

Summary

- Conversation is a powerful, and generally unrealized, vehicle for professional learning
- Conversations between teachers and supervisors are frequently “contaminated” by their unequal power in the organization
- The key to rewarding conversations is to organize them around the “big ideas” and recognized topics
- Problem-solving, rather than feedback, yields productive conversation about teaching