

Learning conversations: more than just words

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It is well known that the tertiary sector in Australia is under pressure. There is uncertainty about government funding, but a driving need to do well in global university rankings that seem to focus on anything but good teaching. Less tenured and more sessional staff teaching bigger classes and subject to (it is rumoured) widespread pressure not to fail students. About 20% of undergraduate students change degrees before they finish, and another 15% are dropping out altogether—thereby incurring a student debt but no qualification¹ It is a difficult time to have a heart for teaching in a tertiary environment.

Australian Lutheran College experienced significant retirements during 2016. Four long term education staff handed over the baton to the next generation. Some of the new staff are experienced educators, others are just beginning their journey as teachers, but as they become part of ALC, what kind of learning culture are they entering? Amongst all the elements that shape organisational culture, what will these staff contribute? ALC operates in many spheres. It shares the difficulties of the higher education sector, it reflects the nature of the church (both saintly and sinful), it has a heart for sending out disciples, a keen desire to discern the will of God for its future, and a focus on quality learning and teaching. What will these new staff discover about learning and teaching from their experience at ALC? What will they absorb from the prevailing culture without even being conscious of it? And, most importantly, how will they define themselves at ALC as learners who also teach?

Teacher as learner

Jennings reminds us that ‘Teachers continue to be learners throughout their careers and opportunities must be given ... for this ongoing professional learning.’² By observing that ‘professional learning’ is ongoing, Jennings affirms that teacher learning doesn’t stop when teachers have completed an initial teaching degree, when they take up a position at ALC, or when they become a Sunday school teacher in a parish. Recent practice defines the term *learner* in a learning community as encompassing all stakeholders who are part of that community and uses the term *teacher as learner* to describe the continuing professional learning that teachers are involved in. Stoll et al (2003) assert that ‘Teachers can play a critical role in creating schools for learning as a move towards their preferred futures. How? By being consummate learners themselves.’³

Teachers continue to be learners as they engage in their daily practice and partake in a variety of learning opportunities. This not only applies to the educators in the primary and secondary schools of the church, but also encompasses the many educators working across all ministries of the Lutheran Church of Australia, including those in various teaching ministries and at ALC. Much of what we know about learners, learning and the art of teaching comes from research in the school sector. We do not need to be shy about taking this knowledge with us into the congregation or tertiary classroom. There is much we can learn from our professional colleagues teaching in schools.

¹ The Australian Higher Education Supplement, 8 September 2016. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/one-in-five-firstyear-uni-students-leaves-their-chosen-course/news-story/991c0859843961415dfbef029807a150> (accessed 1 March 2017)

² Jennings, Meryl. 2008. ‘Preparation of beginning teachers.’ *SchoolLink* 14, no. 2 (May): 4.

³ Jennings, 7.

Professional learning

For many years the term *professional development* was used to describe activities designed to enhance knowledge of theory and practice. More recently, the term *professional learning* has become popular. This is perceived to better capture the link between learning and change of practice.

Professional development includes ‘the full range of activities, formal and informal, that engages teachers or administrators in new learning about their professional practice’. Professional learning refers to ‘changes in the thinking, knowledge, skills and approaches to instruction that form practicing teachers’ or administrators’ repertoire.’ Thus professional learning could involve changes in one’s capacity for practice (i.e. changes in professionally relevant thinking, knowledge, skills, and habits of mind) and /or changes in practice itself (enacting the new knowledge and skills in one’s daily work).⁴

It can be argued that something is not truly learned until it is implemented. Educators grapple with new information about learners and learning and the implications for their own teaching. They must ascertain where this sits in relation to their current beliefs and understandings about learners and determine how the new insights will change their practice. Research in response to the gap between acquired information and learning which changes practice has resulted in methods for generating professional learning that endeavour to provide better support for educators in relation to their own learning. There are also implications for the professional learning of pastors, and other church and congregational leaders.

The Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School leaders identifies that ‘Professional learning will be most effective when it is relevant, collaborative and future focused, and when it supports teachers to reflect on, question and consciously improve their practice.’⁵ It is also known that adult learners need to feel valued and respected. The Professional Learning in Sydney Catholic Schools Framework outlines the following in relation to adult learners.

The adult learner:

- responds to collaboration and is part of the construction of the learning design.
- needs to critically reflect and ask, “Why do I need to learn this?” or “How is this relevant to me?”
- draws from a range of past experiences as a source of knowledge.
- perceives that what is to be learnt will be relevant and address needs.
- is intrinsically motivated.
- is self-determined and empowered to learn.
- prefers to be involved in a continuous process of action, reflection, deepened understanding and experimentation.⁶

These principles are important both for us in our tertiary classrooms and congregational bible studies, but also in our own development as learners. One method of professional learning which can demonstrate them, is participation in learning conversations, which are often embedded in learning communities.

⁴ Knapp, M.S. 2003. ‘Professional development as a policy pathway.’ In Review of Research in Education, edited by R.E. Floden. Washington: American Education Research Association, 112–113.

⁵ The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. 2012. ‘The Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School leaders.’ 4. http://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/australian_charter_for_the_professional_learning_of_teachers_and_school_leaders (accessed Feb 2017.)

⁶ Catholic Education Office. 2008. Professional learning in Sydney Catholic schools.

Learning communities

The church catholic, the LCA, congregations, and ALC are all learning organisations. Senge introduced a concept of learning organization which extended beyond the academy. Hord later reflected

Senge advocated...a different organizational structure, better suited to a complex, interdependent, and fast changing society. Such an organization is orientated toward learning rather than controlling mechanisms. Senge saw this new conceptualised learning organization as one “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.”⁷

Senge’s concept of ‘learning organizations’ was embraced in educational environments, but the term ‘learning communities’ emerged to better reflect the context. Kilpatrick et al proposed a definition of learning communities for the twenty-first century;

Learning communities are made up of people who share a common purpose. They collaborate to draw on individual strengths, respect a variety of perspectives, and actively promote learning opportunities. The outcomes are the creation of a vibrant, synergistic environment, enhanced potential for all members, and the possibility that new knowledge will be created.⁸

Louis, in discussing how to create professional communities that learn, reminds educators that

As Dufour points out in many of his articles, who could, in principle, be against a school in which teachers collaborate to improve student learning? One problem, however, with much of the early literature in regard to learning communities was that it portrayed the development of a PLC as an innovation to be implemented rather than as a culture change that would take years and create conflict as well as success.⁹

There is no set formula for establishing and maintaining a learning community. Research¹⁰ does indicate that there are certain characteristics, themes or dimensions of professional learning communities that learning institutions can employ in establishing or supporting their learning communities. Hord summarises these as

- Supportive and shared leadership
Requiring the collegial and facilitative participation of the principal who shares leadership—and thus, power and authority—by inviting staff input and action in decision making.
- Shared values and vision
Including an unwavering commitment to learning that is consistently articulated and referenced in the staff’s work.

⁷ Senge quoted in Hord, Shirley M., ed. 2004. *Learning together, leading together: changing schools through professional learning communities*. New York: Teachers College Press, 6.

⁸ Kilpatrick, Sue, Margaret Barrett, and Tammy Jones. 2003. *Defining learning communities*. Tasmania: Centre for research and learning in Regional Australia, 10.

⁹ Louis, Karen Seashore. 2006. ‘Changing the culture of schools: Professional community, organizational learning and trust’. *Journal of School Leadership* 16, no. 4: 7–8.

¹⁰ Dufour, Richard, and Robert Eaker. 1998. *Professional learning communities at work: best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service; Stoll, Louise. 2010. *Stimulating learning conversations*. ACEL 2010 Conference – Hosting and Harvesting; Hord, 2004.

- Collective learning and application of learning
Requiring that staff at all levels are engaged in processes that collectively seek new knowledge and application of the learning to solutions that address students' needs.
- Supportive conditions
Including physical conditions and human capacities that encourage and sustain a collegial atmosphere and collective learning.
- Shared practice
Involving the review of teacher's behaviour by colleagues and includes feedback and assistance activity to support individual and community improvement.¹¹

The focus of a learning community changes from 'I' to 'we'. This 'heralds a shift in the emphasis from learning with the focus on the individual to learning as part of a community'¹² Each of the characteristics contributes to a focus on learning, and supports, encourages and values its educators in participating in conversations about their learning and their student's learning. With this assumption in mind, it is vital that the leaders of a learning community are not only aware of this but also plan and provide structures within their learning community to ensure that focus is and continues to be on learning. They encourage staff to engage in a variety of learning opportunities. Professional Learning in Sydney Catholic Schools¹³ outlines the following learning opportunities for teachers. They could logically also be employed by pastors and congregational educators.

- Professional reading
- eLearning
- School based program
- External course
- Critical friend
- Coaching
- Mentoring
- Peer observation
- Practicum/school visits
- Professional learning teams
- Professional conversations

Learning conversations are listed as one possible learning opportunity but they also play an important part in many of the others.

Professional learning conversations

In the keynote presentation at the 2010 Australian Council for Educational Leaders Hosting and Harvesting Conference, Stoll defined a learning conversation as 'the way 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'. Jackson and Temperley¹⁴ suggest that learning conversations involve three fields of knowledge

¹¹ Hord, 7.

¹² Kilpatrick, 1.

¹³ Catholic Education Office.

¹⁴ In Katz, Steven, Lorna M. Earl, and Sonia Ben Jaafar. 2009. *Building and connecting learning communities: the power of networks for school improvement*. California: Corwin, 66.

- What is known from theory, research and best practice
- What the group knows, the tacit knowledge of those involved
- New knowledge that is created together through collaborative work

Learning conversations are more complex than just talking. They are reflective, deliberate and involve subsequent action designed to improve practice.

It's through conversation that teachers clarify their beliefs and plans and examine, practice, and consider new possibilities. ...With skilled facilitation, conversations can help a teacher reflect deeply on their practice and see patterns of both student behaviour and the results of teacher actions.¹⁵

Learning conversations provide a way to encourage educators to share teaching practice, which in turn raises important issues in relation to learning and teaching. A lot of the literature about learning conversations is embedded in literature concerning learning communities. The two are intimately connected. Dufour reminds us that the focus of a learning community is on learning about its core business

The professional learning community model flows from the assumption that the core mission of formal education is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn. This simple shift—from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning—has profound implications for schools.¹⁶

In a learning institution this means that all the stakeholders have a shared and clear understanding of learning, learners and what a learning community is. This knowledge and understanding will assist them as they not only begin, but continue to, engage in conversations about learning.

Dufour contends that staff need to continually explore the following three questions in relation to learning.

- What do we want each student to learn?
- How will we know when each student has learned it?
- How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?¹⁷

Katz et al state that there is a strong connection between the student and teacher learning needs. Teachers can state what students need to learn but the challenge is how to put this into practice alongside of how to establish that the intended learning has occurred. In addressing this challenge teachers not only learn what the students may not have understood, they may also conclude that their teaching practice needs to change in some way to facilitate the learning needs of their students¹⁸

Danielson discusses the characteristics and benefits of a learning conversation in an education context and concludes that

The value of professional conversations extends far beyond the particular settings in which they occur; that is they have value both in the moment and over time. By participating in thoughtful

¹⁵ Danielson, Charlotte. 2009. *Talk about teaching! Leading professional conversations*. California: Corwin Press, 1.

¹⁶ Dufour, Richard, 2004. 'What is a professional learning community?' *Educational leadership* 61, no. 8 (May): 8. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may04/vol61/num08/What-Is-a-Professional-Learning-Community%C2%A2.aspx> (accessed Feb 2017)

¹⁷ Dufour, 7.

¹⁸ Katz, 6.

conversations about practice, teachers acquire valuable habits of mind that enable them to pursue such thinking on their own, without the scaffolding provided by the particular conversation. On another occasion, teachers can consider the lessons they have extracted from a given situation and determine their applicability to a new set of circumstances. It is this transfer of insight that makes professional conversations such a powerful vehicle for learning.¹⁹

Implementing professional learning conversations

To the extent that implementing deliberate learning conversions requires a change of culture, intentional effort is required. Learning conversations don't just happen. Potential issues include: time, the need to communicate purpose, the need to establish trust, the need to create a safe environment for sharing, the need for leaders to act with consistency and to demonstrate commitment to learning by participating in the conversations themselves, the need for active listening, the maintenance of confidentiality and the need for an environment which supports being vulnerable and able to learn from each other.

Shared understanding is also very important in relation to establishing meaningful conversations. At the beginning of the process of establishing learning conversations in an education environment Danielson suggests that educators need to be asked and work through some key questions, which she calls big ideas. These big ideas shape professional conversations and relate to what the learning community believes and understands about learners and learning. These might include

- What constitutes important learning?
- What causes learning?
- How are students motivated?
- What is intelligence, and how do students' views influence their actions?²⁰

Such questions help staff to develop a shared understanding which forms the basis of future conversations.

There are several frameworks which can be used to guide a professional learning conversation. Easton²¹ in *Protocols for professional learning* recommends and suggests a variety of protocols that can be utilised to facilitate learning conversations. Descriptors about a variety of protocols include

- **Processes** that help groups achieve deep understanding through dialogue.
- **Structures** for groups that allow them to explore ideas deeply through student work, student data, products/items of educator practice, texts relating to education, problems and issues that arise daily in schools.
- **Guidelines for conversation** based on agreed norms that make the dialogue safe and effective.
- **A facilitated set of steps** which everyone understands and has agreed to that permits a kind of conversation that people don't usually have during a discussion.
- **A constructivist approach** to discussion that allows for deep development of ideas as certain people talk while others listen and then talkers listen and the listeners talk, with each round characterised by reflection and exploration.
- A way for educators to **build collaborative communities**, professional learning communities.

Easton also provides detailed guidelines in relation to protocols for learning conversions in education institutions that are focussed on

¹⁹ Danielson, 5–6.

²⁰ Danielson, 27–28.

²¹ Easton, Lois Brown. 2009. *Protocols for professional learning*. Alexandria: Association for supervision and curriculum development, 1.

- examining student work
- examining professional practice
- examining issues and problems
- effective discussions

Many of these are also applicable to a congregational or wider church context.

Reflections on the local context

My involvement in both formal and informal professional learning conversations in recent years has led me to several conclusions. Learning conversations are not just 'show and tell'. Learning conversations are more than just words. They encourage and challenge educators to examine and think about their learning and teaching practice and how this is informed by their beliefs and understanding about learning. Learning conversations also provide an opportunity for educators to articulate what they know about learning and in turn what they have learned about learning. Most importantly of all, learning conversations allow teachers to identify additional areas of learning to their given situation that they can investigate and explore in greater depth.

Learning is collaborative in learning communities. It is all too easy in a busy institution, be it a small theological college or a congregation, to become a series of silos. Learning Conversations are a powerful way for those involved in educating to share and acknowledge each other's expertise, wisdom and knowledge about practice and thus to improve their own.

Conclusion

Janetzki argued that 'the whole church has a responsibility to teach, just as it has a responsibility to learn.'²² Learning conversations are one way, supported by research and adult learning principles, in which the church can engage in a process designed to ensure that it fulfils its responsibility to learn. In the schools and colleges of the church, the focus of this collective learning will encompass not only that which relates to our faith, but also that which relates to our call to teach. John Cotton Dana wrote 'Who dares to teach must never cease to learn.'²³ Professional learning conversations are more than just words. They facilitate collective learning which generates action. They are a worthy part of our collegial identity as teachers and learners.

²² Janetzki, Elvin W. 1985. *The Church teaches: a Lutheran view of education*. Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 16.

²³ When asked to supply a Latin quotation to be used as an inscription at Newark State College in Union, New Jersey back in 1912, John Cotton Dana couldn't come up with one. Instead the librarian, also from Newark, New Jersey, composed one. 'Who dares to teach, must never cease to learn.'
<https://novanews19.wordpress.com/2011/12/20/who-dares-to-teach-must-never-cess-to-learn/> (accessed 1 March 2017)