



The Learning Conversation

Talking together for professional development

“All teachers can think of a conversation that has changed their professional practice. But was it a happy accident – or the result of a structured approach to professional learning?”

Contents

What is a learning conversation?	2
When might learning conversations happen?	3
What does a successful learning conversation look like? How is it supported?	5
What are the benefits?	7
The literature on the learning conversation: suggestions for further reading	9
How this leaflet was developed	11

What is a learning conversation?

All teachers can think of a conversation that has changed their professional practice. But was it a happy accident – or the result of a structured approach to professional learning?

A learning conversation is a planned and systematic approach to professional dialogue that supports teachers to reflect on their practice. As a result the teacher gains new knowledge and uses it to improve his or her teaching.

The GTC spring 2004 survey of more than 4,000 teachers shows that a substantial majority gain their inspiration for their most effective lessons from talking with colleagues. The survey also reveals the extent to which teachers engage in and value learning conversations with their colleagues as part of their professional development. Almost all (97%) say they have engaged in professional, knowledge-sharing conversations with their colleagues. For further findings visit www.gtce.org.uk/TeacherSurvey04

Learning conversations may take place with a fellow teacher, an inspiring manager or with a pupil. Most commonly, they take place when teachers observe other teachers teach or through mentoring or coaching.

When might learning conversations happen?

There are many opportunities, both formal and informal. One common example is in joint lesson planning and review.

Dulwich Hamlet Primary School **Learning conversations and planning**

Dulwich Hamlet Primary School is an oversubscribed three-form entry primary school in Southwark. The school requires all teachers to plan their lessons together, seeing this as an opportunity for learning conversations.

Directed time each week includes one twilight session (with food) where the three teachers in each year group work together to plan the following week's teaching.

In some year groups, one teacher will take responsibility for teaching a particular session or subject across all three classes, but the session is planned with the teachers from all classes so they can learn from the person who is most confident. In other year groups, the team leader will write up the notes of the group onto the weekly planner.

One of the benefits of this approach is that three people's experience can be used to inform a decision.

Does your school use routine tasks, like joint planning, as professional development opportunities?

Find out more at
www.gtce.org.uk/DulwichLearningConversations

Learning conversations can also take place:

- During discussions following observation
- In the staff room at the end of the day
- Between members of different professions meeting to plan or review support for a pupil or family
- In performance management meetings
- Through formalised mentoring/coaching relationships
- Through an online discussion forum
- At meetings between job share partners or others working together on a shared project
- Through a planned conversation on the phone.

The next case study shows learning conversations between members of different professions.

Frache First School

Learning conversations between members of different professions

Frache First School in Kidderminster is an extended school for children up to nine years old. The site is open seven days a week, 50 weeks of the year. Staff work with police officers, health professionals and social carers in the interest of the child.

The school has found that all parties benefit when professionals from different disciplines explain something that is routine to them but unfamiliar to the other. Sandwich lunches provide the opportunity for staff to share their experiences, tackling issues that arise in their own setting and learning from the children in the school as well as from colleagues.

With the Children Bill proposing to increase the number of extended or full service schools over the next eight years, and an emphasis on collaboration within and beyond the profession, Frache First School's model of learning may become increasingly familiar.

Do conversations between different professions take place where you work?

Find out more at

www.gtce.org.uk/FracheLearningConversations

“We can be mentored by our pupils who help us to see things in new ways”

Val Weddell-Hall, head teacher, Frache First School

What does a successful learning conversation look like? How is it supported?

Mutual learning for both parties is the goal. Successful social conversations are rooted in successful relationships and the same applies to professional learning conversations.

Being able to trust is essential. It is important for both parties to establish the boundaries of where the information shared will go. This ensures that all involved are confident and comfortable about acknowledging their learning and their learning needs.

A learning conversation is also important to be sensitive to potential power imbalances. It will not suit everyone's learning style and should not be imposed. A learning conversation is structured, not a casual activity. It is critical that both parties are willing to make it a priority and set aside time for it. Both parties need to be attentive and active listeners. Social interaction, where 'teaching talk' and 'social talk' become intertwined, helps the process.

The next two case studies show contrasting approaches, in very different schools, both working well.

Framwellgate School, Durham **Learning conversations and School Leadership**

Framwellgate is an 11-18 comprehensive on the outskirts of Durham City. All meetings of the school's senior management team are focussed on learning rather than administration. (Is this reflected in your school, or could it be?) Its single-item-agenda meetings emphasise reflection and mutual learning, with supporting documentation that always includes research papers.

Two particular approaches that have been useful are "Check-in, check-out" and "Double-loop Learning". The group starts by talking about the pressures they have faced that day, so that they "check in" their baggage and are ready to learn. At check-out, teachers sum up what they have learned and how they intend to involve others in implementing decisions made. Double-loop learning requires the group to dig below the obvious practical questions, challenge their attitudes and assumptions and to answer the big questions like "should we be doing this at all".

Could these approaches work for you?

Find out more at
www.gtce.org.uk/FramwellgateLearningConversations

Brislington School

Learning conversations through coaching

Brislington School is an 11-18 comprehensive school in challenging circumstances on the outskirts of Bristol. The school has had training school status for three years.

Brislington has set up a programme of coaching to offer formal opportunities for teachers to learn through talking together, developed through work in ITT within the school. Six teachers have received training on coaching skills and other teachers were invited to nominate themselves to be supported by them. This included at least an initial meeting, three lesson observations and feedback sessions, and a final meeting. There is an understanding that over the course of the year each teacher (whether involved in coaching or not) will make 12 observations of another teacher or teachers teaching.

Evaluation has shown the impact it has had on the quality of teaching of those being coached, and coaches have also identified a range of positive outcomes for themselves in pedagogy and in management skills. The leadership team feel it has had an impact on the school overall, including a growth in respect for different teaching styles and the individuals within the school.

Are there ways that your school can build on positive experiences of support for initial teacher training? Do you currently have time ‘set aside to discuss pedagogy’, as one Brislington coach observes? Would you like to? Is this possible within current structures?

To find out more, visit

www.gtce.org.uk/BrislingtonLearningConversations

This includes a copy of the protocol document which established procedures so that everyone was aware of the way the project would operate.

“It’s changed that conversation in the staff room that goes ‘I’m having real difficulties with that Jamie’/ ‘oh, he’s alright for me’ to ‘I’ve found he’s better for me when I ... Have you tried...?’”

Coach, Brislington school

What are the benefits?

Learning conversations are a time – and cost – efficient way of learning because two or more colleagues learn together at the same time.

They are beneficial to teachers, teaching assistants and other professionals by helping improve work with pupils and the development of the school as a whole. They are a powerful way of encouraging staff to reflect on their practice and to explain and share effective practice.

Teaching can often be an isolated activity. Learning conversations can help develop individual self-esteem and build staff cohesion. Talking together in structured ways can help reduce feelings of isolation and relieve stress and frustration.

There are particular benefits in terms of improving communication. Learning conversations provide an opportunity to develop a shared and common language for people working together. Particular skills such as questioning skills can also be enhanced.

This case study shows how learning conversations can take place between teaching assistants.

Brooklands Special School **Learning conversations between support staff**

Brooklands Special School in Reigate, Surrey has 75 children on roll and eight classes. Because of the diverse range of children's needs, there is a high staff:pupil ratio and the school employs 31 support staff.

The school's mentoring scheme, run by seven teaching assistants who have been trained to mentor other TAs and special needs classroom assistants, provides a structure for learning conversations to take place. The aim is to meet every week in the new member's first half term.

Conversations through the mentoring scheme have a positive impact, not only for the staff who are mentored – mentors' confidence has increased, and the scheme has distributed leadership within the school.

Could a scheme like this be helpful where you work?
What would need to change for this approach to work for you,
and how could these changes be made?

Find out more at

www.gtce.org.uk/BrooklandsLearningConversations

“You have to be really positive if people are going to learn from their conversations with you – there’s a tendency to talk about what’s going wrong, not what’s going right.”

Mentor, Brooklands school

“The project set out to discover how important the [sharing of ideas through professional discourse in the workplace] was within this complex learning equation and it concluded that not only were interactions important but perhaps the single most important element in the whole equation”

Aim of the NTRP research

The literature on the learning conversation

Suggestions for further reading

These references elaborate the learning conversation in theory and practice.

The work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky suggests that successful learning for adults and children is rooted in social participation and learned not in isolation but with the assistance of others. An overview of Vygotsky's thinking and the implications for teaching was appears in the December 2003 Research of the Month feature on the GTC website at www.gtce.org.uk/VygotskyROM

Stephen A. Brookfield, in *Developing Critical Thinkers* (1987), determines some of the components of a good conversation which can be applied to a learning conversation. These include it being reciprocal and evolving, and entailing both diversity and agreement.

Harri-Augstein and Thomas, in *Learning Conversations* (1991), describe the features of these conversations – ‘The learner remains a spectator of his or her own process long enough to explore it in depth’.

Stoll and Fink in *Changing our Schools* (1996), identify ways that ‘Good teachers become better teachers by talking about their learning’.

The engagement of professionals in a Learning conversation is further endorsed by research for the National Teacher Research Panel www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp , *Engaging with each other: How interactions between teachers inform professional practice* (2000).

The Teacher Training Agency (TTA) has also published useful material. Please visit their website for further information at www.tta.gov.uk

This publication complements guidance from the national strategies on professional development provided by DfES. Please see www.teachernet.gov.uk for further information, and practical advice for schools on professional development.

The EPPI review on *The impact of collaborative CPD on classroom teaching and learning* highlighted the need for ‘processes to encourage, extend and structure professional dialogue’. Further details of this work can be found in the February 2004 Research of the Month feature on the GTC website at www.gtce.org.uk/CPDROM

The National Strategies are developing resources for teachers in which the learning conversation is implicitly or explicitly endorsed as a tool for professional development. One example is *Excellence and Enjoyment: learning and teaching in the primary years – Introductory guide: continuing professional development* (DfES 2004, order DfES 0243-2004 G from 0845 60 222 60).

Argyris, C. (1977) “Double Loop learning in Organisations” in *Harvard Business Review* Sept-Oct 1977.

Senge, P., Ross, R., Smith, B., Roberts, C., Kleiner, A., (1994) *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*.

The GTC’s *Teachers’ Professional Learning Framework* is available to download at www.gtce.org.uk/tplf or by phone or postal request (GTC contact details on back page of this leaflet).

How this leaflet was developed

The GTC's Professional Development Advisory Committee agreed the scope of this leaflet.

GTC policy staff consulted with teachers on its content through a series of events and school visits sourced through the GTC's **Connect** network of school CPD Co-ordinators.

To find out more about the Connect network visit www.gtce.org.uk/Connect. The experiences of these practitioners and their responses to early drafts informed the leaflet.

We are very grateful to all those who gave up their time for the learning conversations that led to the production of this leaflet.

“Teachers support their colleagues in achieving the highest professional standards. They are fully committed to sharing their own expertise and insights on the interests of the people they teach and are always open to learning from the effective practice of their colleagues.”

General Teaching Council’s Code of Professional Values and Practice for Teachers

www.gtce.org.uk/code



For more copies of this leaflet, download from www.gtce.org.uk/LearningConversations, or phone, or write to the GTC's Birmingham office.

Learning conversation

Publication date: September 2004

Publication code: P-LCON-0904

Birmingham: Victoria Square House, Victoria Square,
Birmingham B2 4AJ.

London: Whittington House,
19-30 Alfred Place, London WC1E 7EA.

0870 001 0308 www.gtce.org.uk