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## **The relational value of professional dialogue**

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# The relational value of professional dialogue

Mandy Asghar<sup>1</sup> and Ruth Pilkington

The question of how academics in higher education institutions (HEIs) demonstrate they have the ability to teach and provide a high quality learning experience challenges the sector. Within this context, the use of professional dialogue for recognising teaching expertise is growing. This qualitative research explored how 16 academics valued their engagement in professional dialogue, and its impact as a developmental opportunity. The findings underline the importance of the relational and social aspects and value of this type of professional learning.

Keywords: dialogue, expertise, professional development, relational, trust

## Introduction

Internationally, the quality of teaching in higher education is becoming more important than ever, driven by requirements to manage increasing numbers and diversity in the student body, the competitiveness of the global education market (Chalmers et al., 2014, Feigenbaum & Iquani, 2015), and demands to enhance students' employability (Henard & Rosevare, 2012). In the UK, teaching quality will be explicitly linked to value-for-money, and assessed through a Teaching Excellence Framework (Department of Business, Innovation & Skills, 2016). Within this context of increasing accountability, our research explored the lived experience of sixteen university teachers, who through professional dialogue, demonstrated they provide a quality learning experience for their students. This is recognised by a national, and increasingly international, standards-based award of Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy. This paper reports on an investigation into the value of professional dialogue, and highlights the relational importance of dialogic opportunities as means to enhance reputation and personal confidence.

## Background

In a report to the European Commission, McAleese et al. (2013) recommended that all higher education teachers should have a professional teaching qualification by 2020 to ensure the quality of the student experience. But what is quality teaching? Chalmers et al. (2014) concluded that 'Quality teaching is the informed use of pedagogical practices in a values-driven culture, resulting in appropriate learning outcomes for students' (ibid, p. 19). This includes: the environment in which teaching takes place, professional practices academics engage in, and the attributes they possess. Although complex to measure, a consequence of establishing criteria for teaching quality has been the

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creation of professional development frameworks and a drive in some countries to ensure staff compliance with achieving a particular standard of practice (Cardoso, Tavares & Sin, 2015).

The Australian university teaching criteria and standards project, established a ‘framework of good practice principles and evidence-based measures of performance’ (Chalmers et al., 2014, p. 5). These broadly align with the UK professional standards framework (UK PSF), which sets out the skills, knowledge and values required to teach effectively (Higher Education Academy, 2011). Subtle differences exist between frameworks. In the Australian version, there are links between expectations and career level, whereas the UK PSF suggests individuals can be recognized for exceeding expectations regardless of position. Recognition is awarded through the designation of Associate Fellowship, Fellowship, Senior Fellowship or Principal Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

In the UK, many institutions provide HEA-accredited development schemes enabling staff to achieve Fellowship. Internationally, as of January 2017, Universities in Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Australia are working with the HEA to support teacher development with almost 700 HEA Fellows across Australasia alone (Higher Education Academy, 2017). Those with development schemes often offer taught programmes for those new to teaching and experiential routes for established staff, many of whom will have had no formal training. Frequently, claims for Fellowship within experiential routes are made in written form, but schemes are increasingly providing alternative professional dialogue routes. In 2016, 38 out of 88 UK institutions claimed to use dialogue in some form (Pilkington, 2016).

### **Professional dialogue**

Professional dialogue creates space and ‘time out’ to talk about applicants’ experiences of learning and teaching. It is divergent and open ended, valued particularly for its slower pace and the need for individuals to listen carefully to others and to themselves (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998). As a crucial component of professional learning, dialogue is well established (Pilkington 2014; Vloet, Jacobs & Veugler 2013; Martensson, Roxa & Olsen, 2011), and is considered a valuable approach for assessment (Joughin, 2010). Personal benefits may include enhanced self-reflection and meaning-making and the development of a new understanding about practice, implying professional maturity (Pilkington, 2014; Crowley, 2014).

### ***How professional dialogue works in practice.***

The dialogic process to achieving HEA Fellowship varies as to how it is framed within institutional schemes. For the purpose of this research, we heuristically follow a model developed by Brockbank & McGill (2007), which Pilkington (2014) describes as follows: The basic premise is that individuals are allocated a mentor, usually a peer who may have completed the process themselves. The mentor works with the individual through a formative dialogic process prior to a final summative dialogic

assessment. This assessment is conducted, normally, by two or more independent assessors who are of Fellowship standing of the same or higher than that being sought by the applicant. In addition, some schemes require the completion of an e-portfolio and/or other written material providing supplementary evidence.

There are suggestions that professional dialogue opportunities have been positive experiences that build confidence and help individuals recognize the development of their teaching expertise over time (Pilkington, 2014). To understand this in more depth, this research aimed to investigate how, and why, it is valued as a means to support professional development.

## **Methodology**

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to explore the experience of sixteen academics to ‘provide an understanding of the internal meanings or essences of a person’s experience in the lived world...’ (Van der Zalm & Bergum, 2000, p. 212). We drew on the philosophy of Van Manen who followed Gadamer’s view that culture and history are important, and through conversation we create a shared understanding (Landridge, 2007). This approach therefore resonated with an exploration of dialogue as a professional practice.

## **Sample**

A purposive group of sixteen self-selecting academics from five different UK institutions were accessed through leaders of schemes where professional dialogue was known to be a well-established option. All participants had achieved Fellowship, Senior Fellowship or Principal Fellowship through professional dialogue, one year or more prior to the interviews. Some subsequently became mentors and, at times, their descriptions touched upon this aspect of their experiences. Participants were accessed through an open email invite from the institutional scheme leader. All provided informed consent and are identified in the findings through the use of pseudonyms. Table 1 provides details of the participants and university type: Post-1992 Universities - N, Further Education College - FE, and small specialist Universities - S.

### Table 1 Participant Details

Semi- structured interviews, lasting 45 mins to an hour, were conducted face-to-face (n= 13) at participants’ institutions or by telephone (n=3). The question framework included: how the dialogue process worked; what impact and/or value the dialogue had for participants; and what Fellowship and the UK PSF meant to them.

## **Data analysis**

Langdrige suggests that hermeneutic phenomenology “should be seen as heuristic- a guide and not a set of rules” (2007, p. 122), hence the transcribed data was analysed through a process of reflective inquiry using the universal themes of life as a heuristic (Van Manen, 2014). Significant statements were extracted and meaning formulated, then clustered into categories and elaborated through textual description for individual transcripts. Findings were compared across participants to reveal key elements of each lifeworld theme. Each theme can be present to a greater or lesser extent in any human experience (Van Manen, 2014), and in our data the most prominent included relationality, materiality, and temporality. To enhance trustworthiness, in the early stages of data analysis we independently reflected on each transcript with discussion about the interpretation and consideration of different meanings of the phenomenon. This was followed by the principal investigator conducting an analysis using the lifeworld as a heuristic, supported by ongoing collaborative discussion about the findings.

## **Relationality**

This paper reports on the theme *relationality*, that is, the interconnectedness of the participants and those who supported them through the dialogic process. As relationality represents a fundamental attribute of the dialogic process, and from our findings is key to the value placed in dialogue by our participants, we decided to make it the sole focus of this paper. Three main categories capture the essential aspects of relationality.

### ***Establishing connections***

There is some variation in how professional dialogue operates; however, all the schemes represented in this sample have processes whereby participants were allocated a mentor who supported them through a formative dialogic process. This relationship appeared crucial to the success of their application for Fellowship. Described as a collegial process, participants made connections with unfamiliar colleagues in ways that pleasantly surprised them, the dialogue prompting something different to occur than the everyday work experience. Diverse views were presented as to the value of having a mentor with knowledge of the participants’ subject. It was considered more beneficial to ‘come away from the discipline’ stimulating conversations primarily about pedagogy and a developing understanding of the UK PSF.

Having that with somebody out of your area probably does give you newer ideas and a fresher outlook (Clare).

It's not quite so personal if you're not from exactly the same area, it's much easier to be a critical friend if you're not a close colleague or somebody who knows you personally, so I can be quite objective with people who are from business or education because it's not my particular baby (Tessa).

In some instances, participants reported establishing their own 'critical friends', often others engaging in the same process. These *reciprocal* peer coaching relationships seemed to become better established than the more traditional mentor/mentee relationship. It is unclear why this happened, possibly a lack of satisfaction with those assigned to them as mentors, or the shared need by peers to achieve success. It was evident that making connections did not always go well, as borne out by the challenges of being a mentor for others who failed to effectively engage with the process.

We kind of supported each other a bit, so when we had that - 'Oh God, I don't know what I'm going to talk about, I'm not sure I am a Senior Fellow' sort of dramas, other people in the group could go - 'Don't be stupid, if any of us are, you are' - that kind of thing (Emma).

I mean, we're almost like students, aren't we, in that if you're told you have to do something by then, when then comes you think, 'Oh I'm going to have to do this'. So I'm a critical friend, and you send emails out saying 'Do you want to chat?' and then as the assessment comes up, somebody emails you saying 'I need a chat' (Peter).

Most participants were satisfied with their mentors except Bob, who suggested the person supporting him had a limited pedagogical background, resulting in his experience 'as very light touch, really light touch. ... we couldn't get the sort of in-depth conversations around some of the issues I was talking about'. Although he felt his pedagogic knowledge to be superior he got what he needed out of the relationship, namely someone to listen, and to provide a safe rehearsal space for the final assessment. Professional dialogue practice promoted more than just the occasional new academic relationship, it stimulated a web of connections across communities that had previously had little to do with each other. Bringing people together physically and providing them with a tool (the UK PSF) to promote conversation potentially brought about a wider impact, just as important as the positive effect on individuals, and is something that emerges from other research and evaluation (Pilkington, 2016).

Normally in this university we're in little boxes in little rooms and we never see anybody else and you've no idea how anybody else works in the university. Once you get around and talk to people who teach different things you do think 'well actually there's different ways to do this' (Peter).

There were varied views about making connections with the assessors in the final summative dialogue. Despite the assessor being in a position of final judgement, it was often considered an extension of previous mentor conversations. It brought out more meaning and honesty, you could be

more yourself than in the written word. Being listened to featured repeatedly and was emphasised as a key strength. Rosie described getting a ‘feeling’ from the assessors that they enjoyed hearing her talk about her practice. As for others, the interview brought back memories of the pride they felt when experiencing the genuine interest shown by assessors in their work.

... so there is a power relationship at play, however, because of the nature of the content, and there was a natural curiosity in the dialogue, it didn't really feel, after about the first 30 seconds, that I was in an assessment position, and it felt that we were really having a dialogue (Chloe).

... because the assessor was so complimentary, was quite surprising to me, and very flattering and empowering for me, I love(d) that (Pat).

Not everyone felt the same, two participants described the assessment as a formidable experience, and the assessor as a ‘person’ as almost absent. It was evident that both had a degree of discomfort with the final dialogue. Peter expected to be asked lots of questions as in an interview, and was taken aback this did not happen. Sally, describing herself as ‘more a pen and paper person than a talking person’, suggested it was ‘not a nice thing to do’.

There was no expectation the dialogic assessment would be easy; it was perceived as potentially a daunting and challenging experience. Formative preparation was key, and as a consequence those who subsequently became mentors felt a sense of responsibility with their own mentees. Success was considered dependent on the assessor's skill in establishing effective dialogic engagement without being overly directive, and participants were more satisfied when they established active ownership of the final assessment.

Humility dissipated during the dialogue very quickly and I very quickly felt like an equal, which was fantastic, a credit to the assessor for making that happen (Karen).

I felt in control of where I was taking them, it was my story to tell and I told the bits that I wanted them to have, it was up to them whether they chose to dig a bit deeper in perhaps areas that I skirted over (Tessa).

### ***Critical friendship***

In this component of connection, participants saw the role of the mentor as helping them establish a relevant evidence base to use in the final dialogue. They felt ‘guided’ rather than told, often their own questions met by prompts designed to stimulate curiosity. Hugh suggested successful mentoring required a selection and matching process to prevent personality clashes and to ensure they were *diplomatic* individuals.



I didn't see that she was spoon feeding me or doing it for me, very much not the case, she was always batting back into my court and making me think. (Hugh)

The connections between the mentors and their mentees facilitated reflection, helping participants uncover their pedagogy practice, make sense of scholarship and reconnect with the student experience. It prompted learning and/or rethinking about examples of teaching and supported participants in making aspects of their evidence explicit and demonstrable against the criteria of the UK PSF. Participants saw how important it was to have such skills and hoped to model it with their own mentees. As Peter suggests, it becomes very obvious if this relationship and/or process fails. He stated that in his institutional scheme it was possible to avoid formative mentoring, but cautioned it could have a deleterious impact.

The reviews I've done you can almost see the people that have never been to see their critical friend because that's what they do, they do tons of things, but it's, this is not what this process is about, is it? (Peter).

...because of that engagement with your mentor in asking those questions, it does make you critically reflect, ...reflect on 'why do I do it that way' and perhaps 'is there theory behind it' ...how have I adapted it to different student groups or, different learning needs of students (Rosie)

Several participants described how their mentor helped them think more deeply about specific examples, attitudes and ways of thinking, and to reflect on how they were approaching the presentation of their evidence in its entirety. Feedback from mentors helped confirm they were heading in the right direction.

What I really wanted to do through the dialogue route was to work out ways in which I could have, were there other ways in which I could have dealt with that (a particular critical incident), I didn't really want to be caught in that position again (Sarah).

This reflective process continued, post assessment, particularly as participants became mentors and were prompted to reconsider their own practice when they heard the ideas of their mentees. There was also something about the nature of dialogue that for Jenny meant she continued to reflect in a way she did not think would have happened with a written application for Fellowship.

I think because it was the medium and the conversation that also allowed a little bit more an emotional engagement in it as a process as well, and I don't get that from writing stuff, in the same way. So yeah there was some, there was definitely some deeper reflection went on (Jenny).

The relational learning associated with the dialogic process stimulated emotional responses from some, underpinned by a sense that a colleague had a vested interest in helping them succeed. This is especially significant where participants may feel their teaching is undervalued.

You felt like you were having a, you know, an opportunity to reflect on your own practice with a fellow professional, and so it felt as if that was a positive rather than just being a ‘right, you’ve got to do this to tick the boxes’ or pass this assessment, or prove to somebody what you’re doing, so it just, you know, had a really nice feel from that perspective (Clare).

### ***Being a good teacher***

I felt as if somebody had kind of at last said to me, in the sort of more formal way, yes actually some of the things you do when you are being a teacher are good things and you’re doing them well (Edward).

Being recognised as a good teacher, capable of delivering a quality student experience, matters. There was strength of feeling across the participants that achieving Fellowship was hugely important for self-esteem. Creating a secure dialogic space to focus on the essence of what it is to teach in higher education was invaluable, permitting an escape from the everyday demands that could at times take all the pleasure out of being an academic. The process provided a horizontal and dialogic peer-to-peer relational means of learning for individuals to test out ideas and rehearse their case (Ligorio, 2013). More than that, this interaction prompted individuals to come to new ways of knowing and ‘new ways of being’ (ibid p. xxii). In addition, participants received affirmation for their teaching skills through sharing their practice. This was a significant strength of the process.

Her openness met my openness, which is starting to build the trust, I already had a lot of trust in X, and I was actually very proud to show somebody my work at that level (Chloe.).

Trust appeared to be a critical aspect, particularly when professional dialogue is viewed as occurring in a semi-public way, through both mentoring and assessment. It is associated with conceptions of ‘authority’, and what Markova (2013) describes as dialogical rationality: ‘the process of reasoning based on the epistemic trust in the other; knowing and believing is achieved in and through interplay with the other;..’ (ibid p. 20). The presence of authority does not preclude dialogical learning, it can be thought of in a relational context, and can enhance social recognition (Bingham, 2004; Markova, 2013). Therefore success confirmed by a respected assessor seemed to carry considerable personal significance. This had the potential to impact positively on participants’ sense of self and consequently their reputation as a good teacher. For some, however, vulnerability permeated our conversations. It is not hard to see how an experienced teacher might feel who fails to succeed when

claiming Fellowship, and in some of our participants' eyes this would be worse if it happened through professional dialogue than a written submission.

I still don't know that I am good enough for it and you can hide behind a written assessment but you can't hide around a dialogue (Karen).

If you are being assessed in front of someone your own sort of self-esteem doesn't want to be hit (Rosie).

Paper routes were perceived as being solitary, anonymous, with the final submission sent off to unknown assessors. In contrast, dialogue is described as natural, real, human and interactive, therefore has more personal meaning. Although referring to school teachers, Vloet et al. (2013) describes the challenges for the ongoing development of mature teachers' identities within an ever-changing sector. The same could be said of teachers in higher education, and the relational premise of professional dialogue as a development opportunity is that it encourages individuals to ask what sort of teacher they want to be. Vloet et al. (2013) positions teachers' professional development as something that should occur in a relational way through dialogue both internally and externally: internally with oneself through critical reflection, and externally with others so that 'professional identities are dialogically co-constructed' (ibid p. 424). We suggest this is particularly important for those academics who may have never had any formal teacher training. This visibility however can lead to exposure, making the relational nature of dialogue and its management critical.

It's kind of very easy not to be Karen but just another person when you're writing an assignment, or a reflection, but when you're speaking to someone face to face, and if you've got a good assessor who nurtures the environment it--, you definitely are Karen, not just another person.

Many participants talked about why they had chosen a dialogic route to Fellowship, as opposed to the written route. Underpinning perceptions included an absence of any relationality in a paper process and that it was an unsupported route. In most institutions, this is not necessarily true, as support for written routes is provided and increasingly through dialogic opportunities, such as workshops and peer exchange (Pilkington, 2016). The focus, however, is on what is written rather than a broader conversation about pedagogic practice and what it is to be a good teacher. Bearing in mind the purposive nature of our sample, the dialogue route was considered by far the preferable option.

...there was something about sharing, having a face to face validation of your work, that was going to feel very different from sending a piece of written work off into the blackness, there was something more real, ...and there was a genuine interest, or a curiosity about how that might feel (Chloe).

There are definite advantages to professional dialogue, it allows individuals to articulate who they are and what it is they do, interactively with a knowledgeable other. Our findings suggest that achievement and confirmation of teaching expertise is therefore emphasised by, and connected to, the relational aspects of the process. In comparison, Emma described how someone she mentored through a paper application process got lost in the writing. As a consequence her mentee failed to get her story across, even though it was acknowledged institutionally that she was extremely able. Pat sums up the value of professional dialogue compared to the paper process:

I think it's much more valuable than submitting an application on paper, which is very one-sided and one-directional, and you agonise over it for so long, and then you write it and you send it off and that's the end, and then you get a 'Yeah, you're an A'. The dialogic form is so much more interactive and mutual.

Overall our research has illuminated both the value of professional dialogue, and highlighted aspects that have the potential to impact on success which should be considered by academic developers facilitating such schemes. This includes considering how best to develop effective relationships between mentors and participants to encourage open and honest reflection; ensuring participants understand the formative value in the mentoring opportunities; and carefully supporting unsuccessful participants to limit damage to professional self-esteem.

## **Discussion**

In order to gain HEA accreditation to be able to award Fellowship, institutional schemes are required to demonstrate the quality of their processes. There is currently no explicit consideration of how relationality is supported, in particular where professional dialogue routes are part of the scheme and our research suggests there ought to be. Professional dialogue approaches have similar ethos to other types of professional learning (e.g. peer coaching, learning in social networks) where the quality of relationships have been shown to have an impact on the outcome (Cox, 2012; Parker, Hall & Kram, 2008; Parker, Wasserman, Kram & Hall, 2015; Borgatti & Cross, 2003). In reciprocal peer coaching, both parties benefit, and success is predicated on three steps: peers together building relationships, peers reflecting together on progress and achieving goals, and peers acquiring the skills to support others (Parker et al., 2015, p 237). In professional dialogue schemes, training is often directed at mentors and applicants separately, mainly focused on processes and understanding the UK PSF. Academic developers should consider the benefits to involving all in the same training and extending it to a consideration of relational factors, as it has the potential to be damaging when it goes wrong (Parker, Kram & Hall, 2012). Relational challenges range from individual factors, such as negative attitudes towards the value of working with a peer and a lack of emotional competence, to

interpersonal factors, such as overdependence, lack of trust and the feeling of betrayal (Parker et al., 2012). Success is essentially predicated on mutual respect and peers feeling safe (Parker et al., 2008).

From a different relational perspective, Borgatti and Cross (2003) propose a theoretical model that sets out influencing factors for effective learning in social networks. We found this to be helpful in terms of situating the findings of our research. The model proposes a number of relational variables which impact on the willingness of an individual to seek information from others. *Knowing and valuing* is concerned with the perceived level of expertise that another individual possesses. *Access* relates to timeliness, whether or not knowledge is easy to obtain, and includes being able to ask the right questions and knowing what these should be. Finally, *cost* implies a weighing-up of risks to self-image and that an individual is prepared to take to seek out that knowledge. In professional dialogue schemes the first two elements of this model (knowing and value, and access) are initially managed by the leaders of schemes for participants - scheme leaders train mentors and match them with participants. In our study, it was appreciated that mentors had knowledge and understanding of the UK PSF required to support success. However, occasionally some participants described seeking additional or alternative support from others in order to move themselves forward. In terms of professional dialogue, knowing and valuing implies mentors also possess skills to prompt reflection. Access relates back to the category 'making connections'. We would suggest extending this to include both mentor and mentee having the skills to establish a relationship that permits the sort of engagement that enables applicants to see the value in this connection. The final element of 'cost' is linked to the 'trust' that one individual has in another, and a willingness to show and accept professional vulnerability (Borgatti & Cross, 2003). In the professional dialogue context, this is important for reputation and self-image and for an individual's perceptions of their psychological safety, particularly in the work situation (Edmondson, 2004). A number of our participants demonstrated a sense of personal vulnerability despite being successful. Trust is therefore crucial in terms of encouraging participants to confront issues and show their lack of knowledge within the dialogue. It assumes that the mentors and assessors have good intentions and is often referred to as calculus-based trust: following an initial interaction, individuals may choose to either continue or discontinue a relationship based on a weighing-up of the risks it may entail (Lewicki, Tomlinson & Gillespie, 2006). Where trust is conferred by a third party (Dibben, Morris & Lean, 2000), as occurs generally through matching arrangements within institutional schemes, it is crucial to establish effective and trusting relationships between mentors and mentees. In addition to feeling safe and the development of interpersonal trust, professional dialogue schemes must establish explicit 'system trust' as a means to demonstrate the security of operational processes (Cox, 2012).

Our findings suggest that 'cost', and therefore trust, is particularly pertinent for professional dialogue, in a way that may be less so for written submissions for Fellowship. Many participants viewed professional dialogue mentoring and assessment as something that occurred in the public domain, so potential for professional vulnerability and negative impact on self-image is heightened.

However, it also tended to intensify feelings of pleasure and satisfaction from receiving such a public acknowledgment of being a good teacher.

Table 2 summarises the three relational variables in terms of professional dialogue. For institutional scheme leaders, reflecting on Borgatti and Cross's model would help interrogate the effectiveness of professional dialogue processes and raise awareness of the potential associated risks.

Table 2 Relational Variables of Professional Dialogue (categorised using Borgatti and Cross's 2003 model)

## Conclusion

The study has found that professional dialogue is highly valued by those who engage in it as an affirming experience. Academic developers should consider how success is underpinned by developing effective mentoring relationships, securing safe spaces for reflection; instilling the importance of formative mentoring and supporting unsuccessful participants. Useful strategies to support mentor development include role play and reflection on recorded dialogues. We strongly recommend that evaluation addresses the relational interpersonal experiences of participants to gain a true picture how well dialogue is working.

We propose that in the current climate of increased accountability there are challenges in terms of creating safe spaces for academics to explore their pedagogic expertise. This research has shown that carefully managed professional dialogic routes to Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy enhance personal practice and build real self-esteem, potentially more successfully than through written applications. We would argue that dialogue encourages the social aspect of professional learning and a more collegiate way of being, said to have become lost in the academy with regard to teaching practice (Feigenbaum & Iquani, 2015; Deni, Zainal & Malakolunthu, 2014).

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