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The use of dialogue in professional learning in higher education

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Synonyms

Dialogue; professional learning; critically reflective practice; professional development; higher education

Introduction

Higher education professionals take part in professional learning in a range of different ways, which may include both formal and informal learning and as initial training and continuing professional development. This entry takes a specific focus on the role of dialogue as a tool for professional learning in higher education. The starting point is to consider two key ideas in the title: professional learning and dialogue.

Professional Learning

There are a number of reasons why professional learning and development are considered to be of central importance within professional practice. Appleby and Pilkington (2014, p.12) argue for 'a need to continually develop ourselves professionally, particularly as the field of education is complex and fast-changing in response to economic, social and global issues.' They maintain that professionals learn when their learning is 'engaged, relevant and related both to theory and practice. In other words, learning must be purposive, deliberative and conscious and it must also be shared.' (p.42) They also note that 'whilst professional learning may incorporate sharing ideas and practice with others, any knowledge gained has to be resituated and reconstructed in relation to individual contexts and practice.' (pp. 45-46). Through dialogue with peers about practice, individuals can 'explore issues with peers, solve problems, reflect and unpack significant incidents, and exchange ideas.' (p.51).

Learning through informed and critical reflection is a component element in critical professionalism (Appleby and Pilkington, 2014) and can be supported and developed through dialogue. Dialogue has an important role to play in professional learning and meaning-making (see Appleby and Pilkington, 2014). As a tool for gaining insights and interrogating assumptions, dialogue can be considered 'a crucial part of professional learning' (Appleby and Pilkington, 2014:49). As dialogue with peers has such

importance for how professionals learn, in the next section the nature of dialogue is examined more closely.

Dialogue

As Pilkington (2019, p.49) has noted, 'defining dialogue is challenging.' Dialogue may be thought of as different in character to discussion. Bohm (2004, p.7) conceptualised discussion as being 'almost like a ping-pong game, where people are batting the ideas back and forth and the object of the game is to win or to get points for yourself'. The nature of dialogue is different, it has 'a different sort of spirit to it', for it is not like a game played 'against each other but *with* each other. In a dialogue everybody wins' (Bohm, 2004, p.7). Dialogue can be conceptualised as 'critical to the active construction and exchange of knowledge' (Light *et al.*, 2009, p.25) and as a social process in which knowledge and understandings are constructed 'with' others, may be related to social constructivist views of learning. Asghar and Pilkington (2018, p.145) have argued that 'dialogue encourages the social aspect of professional learning and a more collegiate way of being'. Dialogue can also be within individuals (Brockbank and McGill, 2007), referring to an internal dialogue with oneself and reminding us of Bohm's (2004, pp.6-7) view that 'A dialogue can be among any number of people, not just two. Even one person can have a sense of dialogue within himself, if the spirit of the dialogue is present' thereby implying that dialogue doesn't necessarily have to be a dyadic interaction.

Dialogic routes to Professional Fellowship recognition

In this section the use of dialogue in professional fellowship recognition schemes in the UK context is specifically drawn on.

In the UK the Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) for teaching and supporting learning in higher education (Higher Education Academy, 2011), is a benchmark against which individuals and institutions can gain recognition in one of the four Fellowship categories. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) may offer a postgraduate award such as a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice which may also be accredited through the Higher Education Academy (which became known as Advance HE in 2018) so that this ~~also~~ provides a route to recognition as Fellow (Pilkington, 2013). Higher Education Institutions' (HEIs) Continuing Professional Development (CPD) schemes are often accredited by the Higher Education Academy (HEA). CPD scheme accreditation may include each of the four Fellowship categories, thus relevant for staff at different stages of their professional careers. HEA Fellowship-recognised professional development schemes are not limited to the UK, they are also a feature of the academic development

schemes of universities in other countries across the globe too (see Asghar and Pilkington, 2018, p.136).

Peer-mentoring and peer-supported dialogue may be features of HEI CPD schemes whereby staff seek recognition for one of the levels of Fellowship within the UKPSF. Pilkington's (2013) pilot study in four UK institutions where assessed dialogue had been used as a strategy for experienced academics to achieve this professional recognition illuminated the use of a mentored dialogue model. It illustrated a formative peer-mentored dialogue process leading to an assessed 'summative' dialogue conducted by independent assessors. Professional learning through such a process of dialogue benchmarked to the UKPSF for Fellowship recognition can be a feature of HEI CPD schemes (see Asghar and Pilkington, 2018). The summative dialogue would normally be conducted by independent assessors who themselves would have the same or a higher level of Fellowship recognition than that for which a Fellowship applicant is being assessed (Asghar and Pilkington, 2018, pp.136-137).

In the next section dialogue, critical reflection and their role in professional learning are examined.

Dialogue and critically reflective practice

Considered to play an inherent role in professional learning, the concepts of the reflective practitioner and reflective practice are central to much of the professional development literature. Reflecting critically on academic practices and extracting the learning from our experiences can be a way of developing and improving in the future. Professional dialogue with a peer acting in the role of a mentor and critical friend can support an on-going reflective process and Pilkington (2013) has argued that dialogue has value in the assessment of professional learning. Ordinary everyday dialogue with others can be differentiated from 'intentional reflective dialogue', the latter a term invoked by Brockbank and McGill (2007, p.71) to refer to 'reflective dialogue that has as its *intention* the provision of a context and support for reflective learning'. Bohm's idea of having a reason for dialogue which makes the dialogue important and worth the effort implies intention and purpose. An explicit intention to engage in reflective dialogue is significant as 'we need to be clear what the purpose of the interaction is intended to be' (Brockbank and McGill, 2007, p.72). Appleby and Pilkington (2014, p.48) have drawn on Eraut's work on the importance of deliberative learning in supporting their view 'that professionals require space for learning and reflection to make tacit knowing more accessible, less implicit and more purposive'. Pilkington (2019, p.48) referred to the importance and relevance of the work of Eraut: 'With respect to dialogue, Eraut's work (2004) is also useful because it summarises the deliberative process undertaken by professionals learning from practice.'

Dialogue with a peer mentor appears to be more effective as a tool for professional learning when it is built on trusting relationships and therefore trust seems to be a key

factor (Asghar and Pilkington, 2018). Assumptions and taken-for-granted beliefs can be challenged by a respected mentor, prompting critical examination and reflection on practice as a rich source of learning. In Asghar and Pilkington's (2018) study, there was evidence of the mentor promoting deeper thought. The benefits of dialogue include the opportunity it affords for probing (Pilkington, 2013). Probing and questioning can encourage deeper thought and reappraisal of beliefs and assumptions. Brookfield (1995, p.2) suggested that 'the most distinctive feature of the reflective process is its focus on hunting assumptions'. Assumptions are important and powerful as they 'give meaning and purpose to who we are and what we do. Becoming aware of the implicit assumptions that frame how we think and act is one of the most challenging intellectual puzzles we face in our lives. It is also something we instinctively resist for fear of what we might discover' (Brookfield, 1995, p.2). In experiential learning theory, learning from experience requires reflection on that experience: 'It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience, it may quickly be forgotten or its learning potential lost' (Gibbs, 1988, p.9). Kolb's experiential learning cycle is a well-known model for reflecting on experience and in his model learning from experience has four stages: 'concrete experience', 'reflective observation', 'abstract conceptualisation' and 'active experimentation'. The cycle can be entered at any point, though the stages must be followed in sequence (Gibbs, 1988, p.10). In experiential learning, learners have an active role in exploring experience and they 'must selectively reflect on their experience in a critical way, rather than take experience for granted and assume that the experience on its own is sufficient.' (Gibbs, 1988, p.14). This critical examination of assumptions and reflection on experiences reinforces the role and value of dialogue with peers in promoting learning from experience.

Concepts and models of reflective practice such as Schon's reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action have been influential in informing thinking about reflective practice. Reflection on experience is inherent in the idea of professional learning and Light *et al.*, (2009, p.59) have contrasted non-reflective learning characterised by 'reproductive practices such as memorization, imitation and the development of rote skills', with reflective learning, the latter 'includes contemplation, experimental learning and the development of reflective skills'. Whilst insights drawn from theories and models of reflective practice can be applied, Brookfield (1995, p.217) has noted that 'reflection in and of itself is not enough; it must always be linked to how the world can be changed'. It can be argued that something of the power of dialogue in professional learning lies in the potential it affords for critical reflection and development of the 'reflective professional' (Light *et al.*, 2009).

Dialogue can be conceptualised as a tool to support the process of critically reflective learning. Peer-supported critical reflection through dialogue as a means of nurturing professional learning is inherent in a rationale for professional learning through dialogue

with others. In a peer-supported dialogue the peer may act in the role of critical friend. However, the allocation of peers to act in this role requires some thought if it is to work effectively. For example, Brockbank and McGill (2007, p.320) noted that a process adopted in many universities of the routine allocation of senior experienced staff as mentors to new entrants without allowing for choice, may well be 'a sure recipe for failure'. Mentored dialogue is built on a professional relationship between mentor and mentee and this requires trust and respect. This may take time to develop through a phased process. Broadly speaking, phases can be described in general terms to comprise the following, and whilst each could be further subdivided, this broad framework may serve to outline the process:

- Exploratory phase of sharing contexts, setting the scene, gaining familiarity and being clear about the purposes of the dialogue, why it is important and necessary. Bohm made the point that without believing the dialogue to be necessary it may cause us to feel it isn't worth the effort and to give up (Bohm, 2004, p.37) and therefore sharing purposes and gaining commitment may help in sustaining the dialogue. The mentor's role may shift as the stages of the dialogue progress, but in the initial stages the mentor will facilitate the mentee in reflecting and theorising and articulating tacit understandings about practice (Pilkington (2013, p.256).
- Intermediate phase during which the professional relationship and understandings between mentor and mentee mature and become more established. In the role of a critical friend, the mentor may both challenge and support the mentee's thinking. Ideas and assumptions that have been taken for granted may be surfaced and probed. Referencing the UKPSF develops conversation centred on the Dimensions of Professional Practice: areas of activity, core knowledge and professional values (HEA, 2011) and the dialogue may explore forms of evidence to demonstrate these in a final assessed Fellowship dialogue.
- Concluding phase which in the case of a process of mentored formative dialogues in preparation for a final assessed dialogue, may be reached when mentor and mentee agree that the mentee is ready for this summative event. The formal mentor relationship is wound up and after the assessed dialogue has taken place, the phase may culminate in a peer-mentor supported reflection on the dialogic assessment, its 'outcomes' and implications for further professional learning and development, together with reflection on the mentoring relationship and its contribution to professional learning for both mentor and mentee.

Tools such as professional development e-portfolios, learning logs and learning journals can be used to capture reflections in the moment and after a learning encounter. Portfolios are often used in professional learning, being 'particularly widespread where assessment

focuses on process or work-based learning. They allow assessment over time, can incorporate corroborating aspects, and can bring out the 'how' of learning' (Pilkington, 2013, p.256). Rather than being restricted solely to text, 'evidence' may be more varied and can take a number of different forms including visual and audio. Such evidence can be organised in creative ways for example a reflective narrative illuminated through a range of varied audio-visual artefacts. This evidence can be used as a source to support self-reflection and peer-mentored reflection and may also be shared with assessors and drawn on as part of a dialogic assessment of professional learning for Fellowship recognition.

Dialogue and the assessment of professional learning

In the UK context, higher education institutions (HEIs) may have their own courses and schemes for academic and academic-related/learning support staff accredited by Advance HE, within the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). Recognition through a HEI accredited scheme may typically be through taught programmes for newer entrants to teaching and through what Asghar and Pilkington term 'experiential routes' via written submission or mentored professional dialogue (Asghar and Pilkington, 2018).

Dialogue may have advantages over written forms of assessment in that it allows opportunities for probing (Pilkington, 2013) and through probing understandings can be explained and meanings explored: 'The deeper message of dialogue is communicated through body language, voice and facial expression. This is hard to convey within the static medium of written text, making dialogue an important tool when exploring value-laden issues, perspective, attitudes and reflection' (Pilkington, 2013, p.256) and this is part of the rationale supporting Pilkington's claim for the role of dialogic assessment in professional education.

It could be questioned how well a formative peer-mentored relationship, based on openness and trust can co-exist with a final assessed dialogue in which the formative professional dialogue culminates. The final summative assessed dialogue may exert a downward pressure which could narrow the potential for learning through formative dialogue. However, evidence exists to suggest the benefits of professional dialogue in supporting recognition of how teaching expertise has developed over time (Asghar and Pilkington, 2018, p.137) and in a recent study of the use of professional dialogues for the assessment of fellowship award on HE Academy-accredited schemes, Pilkington (2019) has shown how effective a dialogue exchange can be in surfacing, exploring and unpacking professional practice. Pilkington (2019, p.58) showed that whilst using dialogue for assessment purposes can be challenging, dialogue has value as a 'reflective and powerful professional learning experience'. The term 'professional dialogue', as Pilkington explains, 'reflects its purpose for professional recognition and award' Pilkington (2019, p.50).

In academics' busy professional lives, opportunities for professional dialogue with peers can be affordances for valuable space and 'time out' (Asghar and Pilkington, 2018, p.136) for reflection on experience and the development of academic practice. In higher education, academic practice can be conceptualised as including research, scholarly activity and teaching and learning, and a professional dialogue may include reflection on the interplay of these, for example how research informs teaching and how teaching can be conceived as a form of research. Dialogue frees up a space where critical thought can mature, policy rhetoric can be questioned, assumptions challenged and 'Ordinary human encounters and conversations can offer opportunities to share meanings and develop a better understanding of experiences' (Su and Wood, 2017, p.29).

Illustrative cameo

The challenges for higher education of marketisation, consumerism and business practices are keenly felt across the sector with far reaching implications for the purposes of higher education, the roles of students who are now positioned as consumers, and the role and work of academics. The impact of competition, rankings, ways in which universities are funded, the discourse of excellence and the metrics by which this is judged, have far-reaching consequences:

Higher education is business. It is big business, international business, part of the burgeoning global service sector. This commercial language, drawn from the corporate world, has infiltrated most, if not all, of the features of higher education, sitting uncomfortably alongside older terms it augments or even replaces.' (Light *et.al.*, 2009, p.4).

As a brief cameo, this serves to illustrate the importance of opportunities afforded by professional dialogue in academic life for professional learning through critical reflection on the challenges and opportunities of the wider environment and what this might mean for universities and academic practice. Professional dialogue can be a tool for the academic to develop as a 'reflective professional', a term used by Light *et al.* (2009, p. 14) as one which extends the concept of the reflective practitioner. The 'reflective professional':

critically reflects on multiple and diverse discourses, on practice within the broader contexts and critical frameworks of his or her professional situation, however situated, constituted or clustered: teaching-research-administration; discipline-department-institution; ethical-social-economic-political; and local-national-international. (Light *et al.*, 2009, p.14).

Conclusion

The role of dialogue as a tool in professional learning in higher education has been explored. Having examined conceptualisations of 'professional learning' and 'dialogue', the UK context and uses of dialogue within examples of CPD schemes linked to levels of Fellowship recognition in the UK Professional Standards Framework, exemplification of these has been through illustrative models of peer-mentored professional dialogue as a formative learning process and peer dialogue as a summative assessment tool.

Reflective practice, a cornerstone of much professional development literature, has been examined and the role and importance of peer dialogue in prompting critical reflection together with the conditions which enable this, have been discussed. Dialogue creates a space for critical thought to develop and mature, something which is important as 'Working solely within the reflective practice tradition can cause us to lose a certain critical "edge."' (Brookfield, 1995, p.216). It has been argued that professional dialogue is a means for nurturing the 'reflective professional', a term used by Light et al., (2009), and can be a valuable tool for professional learning.

Cross References

To be added

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