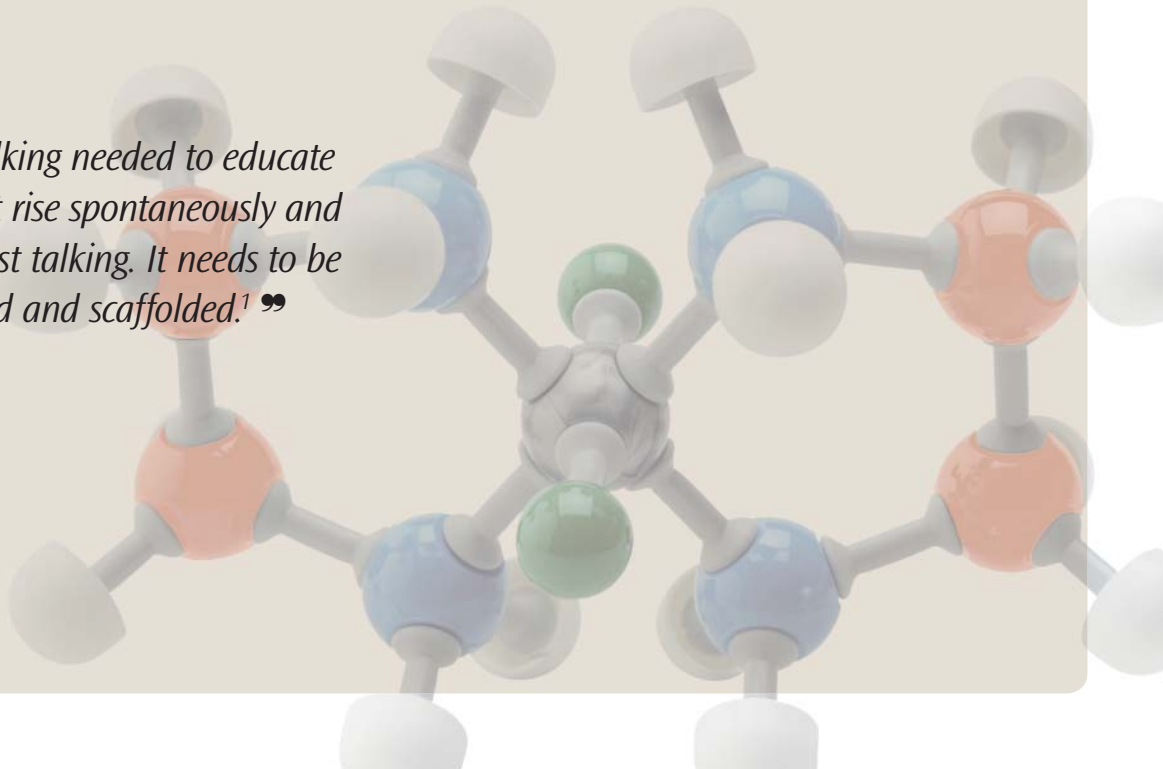
NCSL National College for School Leadership

Learning conversations in learning networks

Transferring knowledge, creating solutions, learning together



“ The kind of talking needed to educate ourselves cannot rise spontaneously and unaided from just talking. It needs to be carefully planned and scaffolded.[1] ”

Joseph P McDonald

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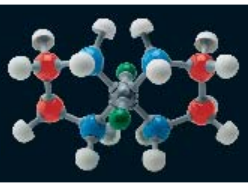

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[1] McDonald, Joseph P, 2003, *The Power of Protocols: An Educator's Guide to Better Practice*, Boston, Mass., CES National

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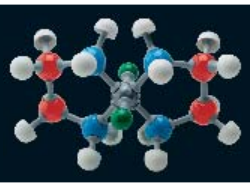

What is a learning conversation?

What happens when practitioners talk to each other? Do you sometimes wonder what it was that made a professional conversation so valuable and memorable? Or, do you wish you could ask difficult questions, but are afraid to offend? Do you find yourself wondering how what others have done can be made relevant to you, or why they appear not to have tackled basic or obvious questions? Do you want to know about what went wrong with a project, before it went right? And, do you want to know how to turn talk into action?

Having a 'learning conversation' ensures that deep dialogue takes place. This is because it is a planned conversation which allows you to reflect on your practice in a structured way (General Teaching Council, 2004[2]). The dialogue is facilitated and follows certain agreed protocols to guarantee maximum learning for participants. It is a collaborative learning model which offers the isolated practitioner, attempting to improve her/his practice, a co-operative group of fellow professionals with whom to engage in order to challenge and assist their own and each other's learning and development (NCSL, 2005[3]).

> ***"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."***
>
> General Teaching Council for England[2]

The following information is intended as a guide which describes some of the ways in which your professional conversations can become focused, structured and well-facilitated in order that truly transformational learning can take place.

Notes

✔ ***"Repetition and practice are required for the full benefits of the processes of learning conversations to be experienced. These are not single events but habitual ways of learning. The more practised the participants, the deeper the learning."***

NCSL, 2005[3]

Preparing the ground

You will want to think about developing a focus for your learning conversation whether it is with practitioners from within or beyond your own network, which enables you to:

- **Come together to learn** and participate in a purposeful learning dialogue with your fellow practitioners.
- **Celebrate achievements** to provide yourself and others with knowledge for success.
- **Focus on the work** you have undertaken, its impact and plans for future action.
- **Participate in a dialogue** which draws on the contribution of other expert practitioners.
- **Talk about the key drivers** for your current work and about how best to move this work forward.
- Ask questions of your conversation partners and **listen to how they problem-solve on your behalf.**
- **Above all, focus continually on student learning.**

The following questions are offered as a way for you to start to think about what your learning conversation might look like:

- Who deserves appreciation?
- What have we learned?
- What have we learned that will be useful to others?
- What could we improve?
- Where could we develop further?
- What are we not talking about that we should be?

[2] General Teaching Council for England, 2004, *The Learning Conversation*, GTC, London

[3] Cotton, C, 'Protocols: The need to organise for learning', in National College for School Leadership, 2005, *The Collaborative Leadership Learning Toolkit*, NCSL, Nottingham

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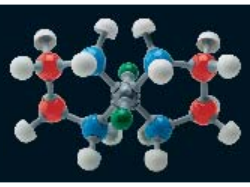

Framing the facilitation

We know from classroom practice that learning is enhanced when there is an atmosphere where everything is open to question and questioning is the norm. In these circumstances we feel confident to challenge established knowledge, interrogate and experiment with new ideas. We also identify the gaps in our learning.

If we can do this, we can avoid a 'talking shop' or show-and-tell, and can experience the learning conversation as a problem-solving opportunity, a collaborative enquiry where participants commit to finding a solution together. By framing the facilitation of the learning conversation we can avoid a situation where the discussion becomes all talk and no action.

Notes

✔ The facilitator will deliberately move the focus of the conversation into the areas of uncertainty, of choice and intuitive judgements, in order to find the areas for new learning and action (NCSL, 2005[3]). They will do this by introducing and sustaining, as appropriate, the elements of dialogue that are common to all learning conversations (see below).

Protocols[3]

When we learn collaboratively we have to be prepared to share openly what we know and don't know. In these situations it is vital that 'ground rules' for active participation are explored and agreed. This attention to protocol is crucial for creating an atmosphere of trust. The facilitator develops and relies upon an atmosphere of trust in which colleagues can speak openly and honestly so that levels of disclosure are achieved in order for practice to be re-formed, refined and transformed.

You will want to think about who will act as your learning conversation facilitator. This is not someone who is going to exercise control over the conversation, but someone who will be responsible for the fact that the group must work within the agreed protocols, and provide the experienced hand to guide a newly formed group through the initial stages of its life.

The facilitator seeks to:

- Read the dynamics and signs sensitively within a group learning situation.
- Enable issues or tensions to be surfaced without anxiety.
- Respect people's willingness to share.
- Use participants' generosity as a valuable learning experience for the whole group.
- Define clearly the activity and each stage within it.
- Segment the elements of a conversation or discussion, the boundaries of which are otherwise blurred.
- Make clear the differences between talking and listening, between describing and judging, or between proposing and giving feedback.
- Reveal the gaps in the group's learning.

Derived from NCSL, 2005[3]

Dialogue

The facilitator should expect to recognise and manage the following types of dialogue *within* the conversation.

- **Dialogue to establish relationships and connections** uses deep listening, mutuality, appreciation and genuine enquiry. Connections and relationships enable us to make things happen. The central feature of collaboration is the power of both questioning and listening.
- **Dialogue for co-creation involves being open to possibilities**. This openness is the opposite of knowing all the answers. People are never so involved as when they help to create something. This generative process motivates them.
- **Dialogue for partnership and alignment** focuses on mutuality, the needs, interests and commitment within the group.
- **Dialogue for action and accountability** makes people accountable for their commitments. It is how things get done within your group. We increase the accountability in our relationships through improving requests, promises and declarations.
- **Dialogue for learning and completion** involves people taking time to talk about the process of learning itself.

Derived from Guilar, 2001[4]

[4] Guilar, J, 2001, *The Interpersonal Communication Skills Workshop*, Anacom, New York

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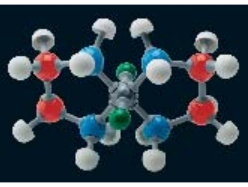


Learning conversations: four frames

Learning conversations can take many forms; we suggest the following exemplar frames. These conversation frames are intended to provide a clear organisational framework and structure for sharing your network's learning and engaging in shared learning with others. If you are planning to hold learning conversations in your network you might use them as a guide to decide which best suits your learning needs and your learning focus.

Workshop

Where the conversation group comes together to share resources and create new ideas and solutions.

You would host this kind of conversation if you have developed a resource/solution which you want to share with others.

eg Lead teachers have developed a resource for using thinking skills in Yr10 Maths. They want to offer their ideas for adaptation by other networks.

Consultation

Where the conversation group comes together to transfer their knowledge about an area of learning focus with the built-in discipline of accountability to peers.

You would host this kind of conversation if you wish to share your knowledge about your chosen area of focus and receive feedback on your progress.

eg A network has produced a transition unit strategy and presents it for discussion and comment. They explore the evidence-base for the actions and impact of the innovation.

Forum

Where the conversation group engages together to create new networked solutions to shared problems through debate and challenge.

You would host this conversation if you want to problem-solve together with others who encounter similar challenges and issues.

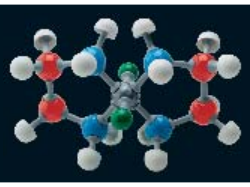
eg Networks are keen to think about a networked approach to solving the problem of able girls underachieving in science. They explore together potential networked solutions.

Hotseat

Where a network member explores their personal learning journey and lessons learned along the way through engaging with questions from the audience.

You would host this kind of conversation if you wish to share your personal perspectives on learning and leadership within your network and share the lessons learned from your experience.

eg A network pupil explains how being in a network has made a difference to her/his aspirations and learning experience. People ask about how to take account of pupil views in their work.



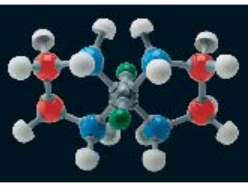
Planning for participation and reflection for action

Irrespective of which conversation frame you choose, preparing for your learning conversation will involve giving some thought to how you plan to encourage participation in your conversation group. The step-by-step guide on the following page provides some guidance on this.

In planning for participation and reflection for action within your learning conversation:

- Creating the right conditions for dialogue which encourages active talking, listening and reflection is important.
- Key to this is the use of good open-ended questions which elicit facts, promote analysis, help to delve into the centre of problems or issues and prompt reflection upon actions, decisions and beliefs.

We know that sometimes it is easy to work in the abstract, knowing the issues, recognising the complexity of problems, but taking action requires risk, challenge and collaboration with colleagues. With careful facilitation, the outcome of your conversations will be jointly planned and owned, actions which you and your network colleagues can take forward.



Step-by-step guide

Questions to ask:
- Which aspect of our work deserves appreciation?
- What is the most powerful story we can tell about our work?
- What have we learned that will be useful to others?
- What could we improve or develop further?
- What is a key problem or burning issue for us right now?
- How can we present this issue in a way which will enable us to enlist the help of others in moving forward?

1. Preparing the ground

Choose a focus – which aspect of your network activity do you wish to share through your learning conversation?

Workshop

Forum

Consultation

Hotseat

Develop open-ended questions to:
- Focus intention, attract energy and direct attention to what really matters.
- Invite further enquiry, open possibilities.
- Avoid negatives – explore opportunities and solutions.
- Create simple questions and challenge assumptions.

2. Framing the facilitation

Select a conversation frame – which one best suits the learning needs of your network and the focus you have chosen for your conversation?

3. Planning for participation

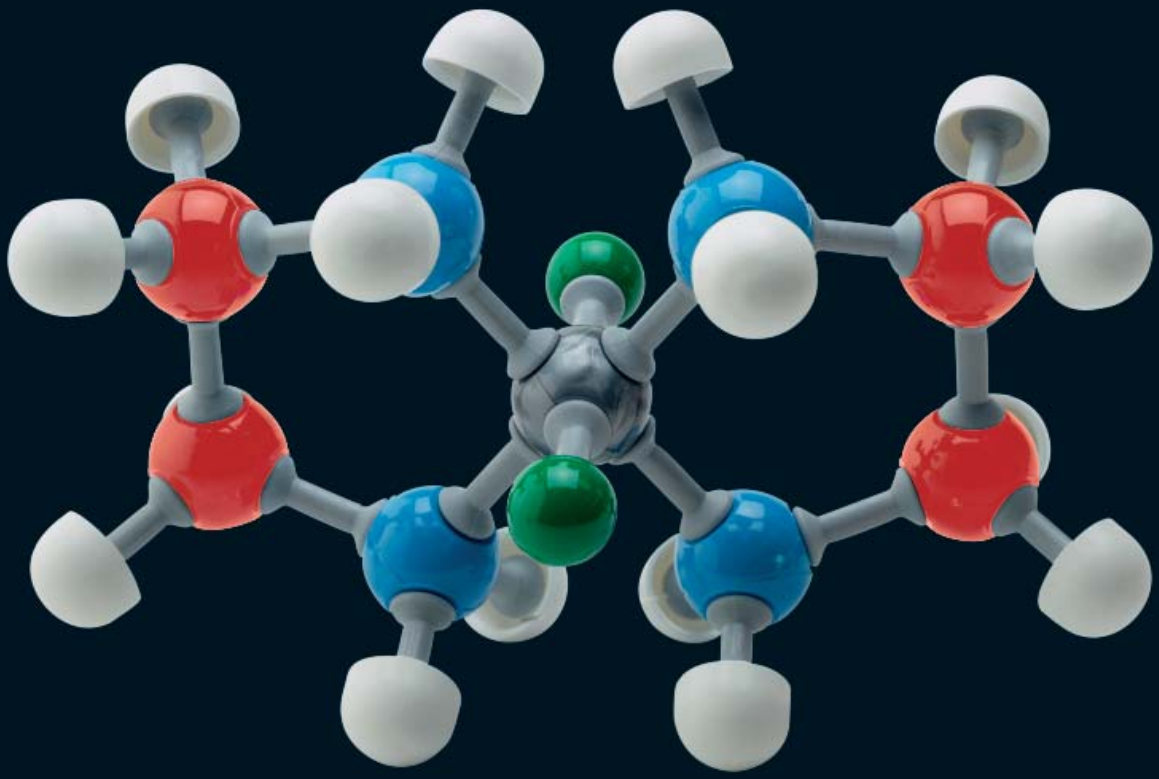
Plan out how you will encourage participation – what strategies will you use to create the right conditions? What questions will you pose?

Create the right conditions:
- Enact mutual respect and build relationships.
- Explore questions that matter.
- Listen to each other, especially when there are differences.
- Open up practice, making it transparent.
- Develop shared meaning; reach understanding together.
- Listen for what is at stake, behind the issues stated.

Turn talk in to action:
- The process is designed for action to be taken.
- The conversation is a precursor to action by the participants.
- Be open to be changed by the conversation.
- Make decisions collectively.
- Be jointly accountable for acting on these decisions.

4. Reflection for action

Decide how you will capture the key learning points – how will you ensure this informs future action?



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