

ICED 2020 proceedings:

Learning through conversations: How can we research informal professional development?

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Abstract

There is growing recognition that informal professional development is important for improving the quality of teaching within higher education (Pataraiia, Falconer, Margaryan, Littlejohn, & Fincher, 2014; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009; Thomson & Trigwell, 2018; Van Waes, Van den Bossche, Moolenaar, De Maeyer, & Van Petegem, 2015). Informal professional development, such as engaging in conversations with colleagues, is distinct from more formal models of educational development as the emphasis is on autonomous, relational, and emergent learning, enabling it to serve academics' future needs. Developers have long advocated for the facilitation of informal learning opportunities (Boud & Brew, 2013; Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2006) and we would argue that these opportunities serve a role that complements the plethora of available activities for developing individuals, groups, and institutions (Gibbs, 2013, pp. 6-7). Despite historical support, informal conversations as a form of professional development has only recently emerged as an area of research. Conversations about teaching occur within small networks of trusted colleagues (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) and they can serve different roles in developing university teaching (Thomson & Trigwell, 2018). We are mindful that the relationship between informal and formal professional development can be complex (Thomson, 2015), and departmental cultures may influence the capacity of academics to learn about teaching and learning (Trowler & Cooper, 2002).

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1 Introduction

As developers and researchers establishing a new field, we are puzzling over how to design informal professional development without either replicating traditional models or losing its inherent serendipity. We seek to collectively further our understanding of the future of informal professional development and professional development more broadly. We reflect on the suggestion of Roxå and Mårtensson (2015, p. 195) – that we should unpack the potential of conversations for professional learning or the microcultures that influence learning. With a focus on microcultures, they created a heuristic based on levels of trust, responsibility, and a development agenda (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015). In this discussion piece, we raise questions that are intended to advance our understanding of informal conversations and their potential contribution to professional learning. The authors are so committed to exploring the role of pedagogical conversations in changing conceptions and practice that they are guest editors of an upcoming Special Issue of the *International Journal for Academic Development* on that topic.

Academics typically have conversations with a relatively small number of people from their departments or disciplines (Patarraia et al., 2014; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009). Through conversations with colleagues, academics expose professional values and behaviours, and interrogate their practice (Pilkington, 2013). Conversations lead academics to change their teaching practice – they are ranked third after student feedback and student evaluations in terms of impact (Lauer and Wilkesmann 2019). Informal conversations have the greatest influence on practice when they are purposeful, grounded, about student learning, and reflective (Benbow & Lee 2019). Conversations take place in liminal and communal spaces, for example cafés, canteens, corridors, and during travel to and from work. Conversations may be prompted by conferences and workshops, where academics with shared interests are physically located in the same space, while other conversations take place online, via email, Skype, Zoom and other communication technologies.

2 The role of conversations, formal development, and networks for learning

Formal development might offer inspiration and new ways to think about teaching and learning, but it is during conversations with significant others about specific teaching and learning experiences that reinterpretation of the pedagogical reality may occur. At Lund University, teaching and student learning is discussed locally with groups from the same disciplinary community. These conversations are frequent, spontaneous, and intensive. In this case, the formal course has influenced the nature of pedagogical conversations by introducing a language for thinking and talking about teaching and learning. Over time, this means that academics know who has participated in the course and who has not, by the nature of their conversations, and their number of conversation partners has increased (Roxå et al 2019).

Formal professional development programs appear to influence the relationship of program participants with the person who has an influence on their teaching. The program enables participants to talk about teaching and, in turn, builds their confidence with regard to teaching-related matters. This way they can demonstrate their increased knowledge and skills and appear to be more trustworthy. At the same time, the level of trust in relationships also influences the extent to which participants' newly acquired knowledge and skills may spread across their institutions (Simon & Pleschová, 2019).

The networks of novices, experts and experienced non-expert university teachers differ in strength, diversity, and the frequency and duration of their conversations about teaching. Experienced experts have larger, stronger, and more diverse networks than experienced non-experts. Novices also have larger networks, but with lower tie strength and less diversity. Experts have conversations about teaching once a month, novices every 2 weeks, and experienced non-experts every month or every 2 months. Experienced non-experts tend to talk with colleagues who have similar teaching experience, whereas novices and experienced

experts talk with colleagues who vary considerably in their teaching experience (Van Waes et al, 2015).

3 Reimagining informal and formal professional development

Informal development differs from formal development in that it is not mandated by university leaders or designed with set, intended learning outcomes. It is often self-directed and focused on what is most important for academics at the time. One way forward would be to adopt a more holistic approach to development – where informal and formal opportunities each have a unique purpose. This approach would require that academics be provided with the scaffolding required to participate in and learn from informal conversations and build their network of significant colleagues. Future research could add to the evidence base for informal learning, especially at the meso (department level). Lecat, Spaltman, Beausaert, Raemdonck, and Kyndt (2020) recommend measuring informal learning using methods that include the social, such as social network analysis. Further, we could borrow from research on organisational and workplace studies to explore the links between informal learning and the development of professional identity.

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