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Everyday Conversation as a Context for Professional Learning and Development

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Because conversation is a constant in our personal and professional lives, we are not inclined to stop and think about it as a phenomenon. However, that is what I have found myself doing. In particular, I have become much more self-conscious, and hopefully more thoughtful, about the conversations that constitute an inevitable aspect of my day to day work in an academic staff development role. Drawing on my own reflections and a body of related literature, I have thought about the features of conversation that may make it conducive for professional learning; how "valued" conversation is as a context for professional learning; the possible ingredients of a conversation and the extent to which they can be controlled or influenced without disturbing, or even destroying, the defining essence of conversation; and the competencies and sensitivities that may be required if conversation is to become an occasion for learning. In this article, I present the outcomes of my reflections and inquiry with the hope that they will prompt conversation about conversation as a context for professional learning and development.

Puisque la conversation est une constante dans nos vies personnelle et professionnelle, nous sommes peu enclins à nous arrêter et à y réfléchir en tant que phénomène. Cependant, c'est ce à quoi je me suis affairé. Plus particulièrement, je suis devenu davantage conscient et, je l'espère, davantage réfléchi, en ce qui a trait aux conversations qui constituent un aspect inévitable de mon travail quotidien en tant que conseiller pédagogique. Puisant dans mes réflexions et dans un ensemble de connaissances connexes, j'ai réfléchi aux aspects de la conversation qui la rendent propice à un apprentissage professionnel; dans quelle mesure la conversation constitue-t-elle un contexte valorisé d'apprentissage professionnel; les ingrédients possibles d'une conversation, ainsi que la mesure dans laquelle ceux-ci peuvent être contrôlés ou influencés sans déranger, ou même détruire, l'essence même de la conversation; de même que les compétences et les habiletés pouvant être requises pour que la conversation constitue une occasion d'apprendre. Dans cet article, je présente le résultat de mes réflexions et interrogations dans l'espoir de susciter une conversation au sujet de la conversation en tant que contexte d'apprentissage et de développement professionnel.

Introduction: Conceptions of Conversation—and the Case for Conversation

Several observations prompted me to begin to think about everyday conversation as a context for professional learning and development. I noticed that:

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(a) my everyday conversations with colleagues often end up including talk about learning and teaching that sometimes has a significant impact on my own and my colleagues' thoughts about learning and teaching;
(b) these conversations are usually unpremeditated and are certainly unplanned. They typically occur when I am "out and about" on campus and are often a fortuitous adjunct to some other planned activity;
(c) many of the colleagues with whom I have these conversations are not those who readily take up other professional development options, including individual consultation and workshops.

My initial thoughts were about the features of conversation that seemed to me to distinguish it from other forms of talk, including discussion. The features that I identified included the following:

- Often serendipitous, rather than anticipated or planned.
- Topics are improvised on the spot rather than being prescribed or pre-scripted.
- All participants can influence the topics, moment-by-moment. As a result, it is not one-sided in terms of whose agenda gains status as topic.
- Often focused on personal, local and immediate matters.
- Story telling is a common and accepted ingredient of conversation.
- Generally perceived/experienced as non-threatening events and the openness of the agenda can encourage permissiveness and risk-taking.

While these characteristics may account for the attractions and the potential benefits of conversation for professional learning, they may also explain why conversation may be an under-valued context for such learning. Conversation may be perceived as an occasion for talk about trivial, non-serious matters (that is it was just a passing conversation) and for talk that lacks rigour.

When I turned to literature on conversation, I found a number of these features were identified in formal definitions of this form of talk. For example, Schelgloff (1999, p. 407) considers conversation to be the "primordial form of talk-in-interaction" because it is not subject to "functionally specific or context specific restrictions or specialized practices or conventionalized arrangements". He also observes that conversation is an occasion of interaction that is "co-constructed" by the participants as it runs its course in real time (p. 409). Co-construction is possible because participants share an orientation to the generic organizational features of conversation talk (for example, turn-taking). This shared understanding of the "procedural infrastructure" (p. 426) of conversation ensures that it does have an ordered and orderly character, despite the absence of pre-determined or prescribed practices.

Patrick (2002) offers the following list of defining elements:

- There are two or more participants who assume several speaker roles and jointly construct and manage the conversation. Typically there is no hierarchy.
- There is usually an exchange of ideas and information.
- Participants take turns speaking but the event is spontaneous.
- There is generally no pre-set order for roles, topics, and turns.
- There is structure evident in rules (for example, for turn-taking) that participants unconsciously follow.

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- Conversation serves social functions as well as those associated with the exchanges of ideas and information. It "gives a sense of order to social life; it creates, enacts and alters relationships; it's built on shared knowledge."

(Patrick, 2002, p. 1)

Encountering Patrick's views about the social functions of conversation reminded me how essential everyday conversation was to my building and maintaining sound relationships with colleagues; relationships that were crucial to the effectiveness of my professional development work.

Such definitions also confirmed that conversation is not formless, disorderly talk. A formal analysis of conversation could reveal structures, types of moves, rules and conventions that are not commonly appreciated. In turn, this raised the question in my mind: could conversation be more productive for professional learning if the participants did have some knowledge of these elements and could be more thoughtful about them when engaged in conversation? This is not a contentious proposition when applied to other forms of talk (for example, discussion, interview, interrogation). A considerable amount of my work, and that of many educational developers, involves efforts to help colleagues and students become more effective discussion leaders and participants. However, while conversation is endemic, equivalent initiatives are rare.

To explore this question, I decided to delve further into the scholarship on conversation and observe the impact of my exposure to some of the products of that scholarship on my own conversations.

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Scholarship on Conversation

I differentiated several broad strands in scholarship on conversation that were relevant to my inquiries including *Conversation Analysis*, *Discourse Analysis* and *Conversation for Learning*. On the way into the related literature, I inevitably encountered debates about the extent to which these represented discrete or competing territories of scholarship as well as predictable debates about the merits of particular theoretical and methodological stances. For example, while some scholars subsume conversation analysis within discourse analysis, for others it represents a separate domain. This ambiguity and variability in use of the term is acknowledged by Slembrouck (2003) who indicates that he chooses to use the term discourse analysis to refer to:

> …the linguistic analysis of *naturally occurring connected speech or written discourse*. Roughly speaking, it refers to attempts to study the organisation of language above the sentence or above the clause, and therefore to study *larger linguistic units*, such as conversational exchanges or written texts. It follows that discourse analysis is also concerned *with language use in social contexts*, and in particular with *interaction* or dialogue between speakers. (Slembrouck, 2003, p. 1)

He also observes that for some scholars, discourse analysis has little to do with linguistic analysis of language. Rather, "discourse analysis foregrounds language use as social action, language use as situated performance, language use as tied to social relations and identities, power, inequality and social struggle, language use as essentially a matter of 'practices' rather than just 'structures', etc" (Slembrouck, 2003, p.1).

Under the broad rubric of conversation for learning, there is an equally diverse body of scholarship that focuses on learning purposes, processes and outcomes that can be associated with conversation. Attention is given to the learning outcomes of conversation for groups of people (for example, in particular organizations and communities of practice), as well as for individuals. The burgeoning interest in this perspective on conversation is reflected in the emergence of such terms as learning conversations (for example, Harri-Augestein & Thomas, 1991), learningful conversation (for example, Senge, 1994), conversational learning (for example, Baker, Kolb, & Jensen, 2002), educational conversation (for example, Garrison & Rud, 1995), and instructional conversation (for example, Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). Again, however, there is ambiguity and variability in the use of these terms that can make the journey into the literature confusing.

While acknowledging the need to become well-informed about these debates, my own initial foray into the literature was fore-grounded by my interest in identifying "products" of scholarship that might inform my own views and actions in relation to professional learning. So, what have I extracted from this review? Here is a sample of propositions and findings that I found helpful in relation to my insights and practice.

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The Conversation Repertoire

Much of the work of conversation analysts focuses on the various types of "moves" that participants can make that account for the orderliness that can be perceived in conversation, despite its open-ended character. As Psathas (1995, p. 2) states, "Conversation analysis studies the order/organization/orderliness of social action, particularly those social actions that are located in everyday interaction, in discursive practices, in the sayings, tellings and doings of members of society." Moves identified include:

- turn claiming, giving and taking moves—that are intended to allow participants to achieve the situation of one talking at a time
- opening moves—that define the intent and the character of the talk (that is as conversational)
- getting acquainted moves—intended to enable participants to establish an interpersonal relationship, particularly when strangers to one another (related moves may involve self-presentation, topic initiation and establishment of common contexts)
- listening moves—that signal attention and responsiveness
- repairing moves—designed to correct one's own or others mistakes and misconceptions
- interruption moves
- adjacency pair moves—where an initial move brings with it the expectation for a particular type of subsequent move (question/answer; invite/accept-decline; request/comply; complaint/apology; greeting/greeting; accusation/denial)
- status establishment and preservation moves
- holding the floor moves.

A particularly helpful commentary on these various moves is provided by Paul ten Have (1999).

While these are the moves that have been subject to most attention, a diverse array of other potential ingredients of conversation have been investigated, including laughter, joke-telling, introducing and responding to good and bad news and teasing. It is also understandable that

there is increasing interest in the impact of new technologies on conversation (for example, Hutchby, 2001). However, I have confined the focus in this article to face-to-face conversation.

Conversation Styles

The name that most frequently surfaces in relation to styles of conversation is Deborah Tannen (1990, 1994). As a sociolinguist, she has investigated differences in conversational styles, differences that she believes can have "damaging effects" on relationships between men and women and between the members of different cultural groups. One of the key distinctions she makes is between "rapport-talk" and "report-talk". The former, which she concludes is more characteristic of women is intended primarily to help "glue relationships together" (1990, p. 25). From this perspective, conversations represent "negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus" (1990, p. 25). The contrast is conversation which involves report-talk or a primary focus on information and an emphasis on "contest" in relationships, rather than community. Tannen contends that this latter form of conversation is preferred by men and the relational dimension involves an on-going effort to maintain the upper hand and to avoid being put down. These are not represented as mutually exclusive forms of conversation talk.

Sharing the interest of conversation analysts in the more specific moves that make up conversation, Tannen has also highlighted differences in "interruption" moves. Redefining these occasions when two people are talking simultaneously as "overlaps", she distinguishes between "cooperative overlap" and "uncooperative overlap". The former includes some words that represent an affirmation of or elaboration on what the other person has been saying rather than a full statement that is intended to launch a new topic—and thereby take control of the direction of the conversation. She also notes that some people refrain from either form of overlapping in conversation in order to show "consideration" for others. In contrast to these "high considerateness" speakers are those who involve themselves enthusiastically in the conversation without regard for whether they are overlapping other speakers. Tannen believes that these "high involvement" speakers don't mind being overlapped themselves and will choose to either give way to another speaker or persist (Tannen, 1990, p. 198). She attributes these differences more to culture and geographic region rather than gender.

The by-products of clashing conversational styles are predictable: annoyance, frustration, misperceptions, stereotypes. Tannen believes, however, that these are not inevitable if people are able to recognize their own style and styles that may contrast to their own and they make an effort to modify their own style so that it aligns more closely with others.

Another concept that is analogous to considerateness and has also received attention is "politeness". Much of the related research acknowledges the seminal work of Brown and Levinson (1987) which identified strategies that people use to save or maintain the interlocutor's self esteem or "face". These "politeness strategies" are used in conjunction with acts (statements) that have the potential to threaten someone's face (that is "face threatening acts"). Four strategies are distinguished:

(a) *Bald on-record*—no attempt to minimize threat to the hearer's face, but appropriate when used with people who know one another very well, for example:
I don't think that's right.

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(b) *Positive politeness*—likely to be used when people know one another fairly well and express friendliness, interest and appreciation of the hearer's concern to be respected, for example:
You must be very concerned about that and want a solution. Could I suggest…
Yes, you are possibly right.
I guess we share that view.

(c) *Negative politeness*—indicate that you may be, and wish to avoid, imposing on the hearer, for example:
Tell me if I am intruding.
I am sort of wondering whether
Maybe if….
I hope you will forgive me for suggesting.

(d) *Off-record indirect*—make a point of indicating that you have not or will not impose on the hearer—but leaving open the opportunity for them to respond, for example:
Perhaps someone else can come up with some options.
I made a point of staying out of that.
I could do with some good advice.

There is vigorous on-going debate about the Brown and Levinson model in relation to its cultural universality and relevance to particular linguistic contexts, including conversation (for example, Watts, 2003). There is also an interesting array of research that explores variations in conceptions of politeness and the way it is expressed in speech. Those variations are associated with such factors as culture, age, social status and distance, familiarity, gender, formal/non-formal contexts. The U.K. Linguistic Politeness Research Group maintains an up-to-date bibliography of associated literature at http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/ea/politeness/.

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Conversation for Learning

The thesis that underpins the conversation for learning perspective is that conversation can evoke reflection that results in learning. Peter Senge (1994) coined the term "learningful conversation" to distinguish conversation that engages the process of reflection, in particular reflection on the mental models that are a foundation for personal action. Mental models, "are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action" (Senge, 1990, p. 8).

He believes that the ability to engage in such conversation is a pre-requisite to professional learning.

> The discipline of working with mental models starts with turning the mirror inward; learning to unearth our internal pictures of the world, to bring them to the surface and hold them rigorously to scrutiny. It also includes the ability to carry on "learningful" conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others. (Senge, 1990, p. 9)

Senge also contends that learningful conversation is more likely if it takes the form of dialog rather than discussion (Senge, 1994, p. 245). Discussion is defined as conversation confined to participants stating and giving reasons for their positions (advocacy), whereas dialogue also involves participants in exploration and critique of the reasons and assumptions associated with their positions (inquiry). In a dialogue, positions represent a starting point for conversation

rather than an end point to be defended; positions may be abandoned, modified or added to. Senge considers the ability to balance "advocacy" for positions and "inquiry" into positions to be essential for learningful conversation. That ability in turn requires people to be able to distinguish accurately between the inferences that they make and identify data that might support those inferences. They also need to be able to verify that data they cite as a foundation for inferences is actually relevant and sound. Senge identifies four common misperceptions that arise when conversationalists lack these abilities:

> Our beliefs are the truth.
> The truth is obvious.
> Our beliefs are based on real data.
> The data we select is the real data. (Senge, 1994, p. 24)

He proposes several reflection activities that can help expose such misconceptions. Some of these activities are based on concepts and processes originally proposed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön. For example, what they call the "left-hand column" technique can be used to explore tacit assumptions that shape our conversation (Argyris, 1990). Following a troublesome conversation, a record of what was actually said is entered into the right hand column; the left is a record of thoughts and feelings associated with the talk. The degree of congruence between the words spoken and what was actually thought can be examined. Similarly, a "ladder of inference" can be constructed to reveal the data and the chain of reasoning that lies behind stated conclusions or inferences (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Both techniques help surface the under-current of thoughts associated with conversation and Senge believes that they can, in time, be applied as conversation is underway. Senge's concept of learningful conversation and such activities are widely cited in literature on organizational and professional learning.

Conversation has been explicitly identified as a key feature of several professional learning initiatives designed for teachers. Some of these initiatives have involved an extended working relationship between an academic staff developer and teacher colleague. For example, Foley and Steed (2002), a law lecturer and academic developer respectively, engaged in "reflective conversation" over the course of a year as they collaborated in a course development exercise. Their ongoing conversation enabled them to work together successfully through three stages of reflection (Brockbank & McGill, 1998) that were associated with the redesign process: surfacing uncomfortable feelings and thoughts as the existing programme was evaluated and possible changes contemplated; deeper analysis of those feelings and thoughts and consideration of a concept ("constructive alignment") that might aid that analysis and the development of new approaches; using the concept as a perspective for developing new practices. Concluding that "surprisingly (to us), our conversation demonstrated unexpected efficiency" (Foley & Steed, 2002, p.10), they highlighted the need for mutual trust and rapport in a situation where expectations and assumptions were being challenged and the need to "pay attention to the conversation". With respect to the latter, they acknowledged that "As a process often made up of 'tacit' knowledge and accepted understandings… we found it easy to underestimate the time and effort required" (Foley & Steed, 2002, p.10).

Spiller (2002), an academic staff developer and colleague, has also given an account of the place conversation can have in mentoring relationship with new teachers. She suggests that

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regular professional conversation can provide a space in the teaching environment where new teachers can come to terms with themselves in their new role. Conversations provide a place where new teachers can explore the connections and contradictions between their previous life and the new one, make sense of their identity in relation to the institution and the culture. Regular professional conversations can also provide a safe environment for the new teacher to test out personal expectations of the job. They can help new teachers to not only *do* the work of a teacher but to grapple with the infinitely complex work of *being* a teacher. In summary, Spiller (2002) proposes four key ways in which professional conversation can be important for the new teacher:

> for exploration and reflection
> for emotional expression
> as a safe and hospitable place
> as a rehearsal for performances.

Clarke, Power and Hine (2002) similarly describe a model for mentoring that is intended to assist professional learning through conversation and the construction of narratives. They characterize conversation as "informal dialogue" that engages mentor and mentee in "the processes of establishing rapport, clarifying ideas, articulating issues, organizing the mentoring experience, and establishing a supportive, collaborative and collegial environment which clearly affirms roles and responsibilities" (Clark et al., 2002, p. 1).

In other initiatives, the conversation occurs within groups that have a professional learning purpose. For example, Clark (2001) has investigated the place and impact of conversation in "professional development and inquiry groups".

The potential benefits that he associates with participation in such groups include:

- articulation of implicit theories and beliefs,
- perspective-taking: seeing the world through the eyes of others,
- developing a sense of personal and professional authority,
- reviving hope and relational connection: an antidote to isolation,
- reaffirmation of ideals and commitments,
- developing specific techniques and solutions to problems,
- learning how to engage with students in learning conversations.

(Clark, 2001, p. 173)

Clark (2001, p. 181) observes, "Good conversation feeds the spirit; it feels good; it reminds us of our ideals and hopes for education; it confirms that we are not alone in our frustrations and doubts or in our small victories" and proposes that conversations that are intended to be a context for professional learning need to involve good content; resist the bounds of definition; be voluntary; happen on common ground; embody safety, trust and care; develop; have a future.

Based on their premise that beginning teachers lack "the opportunity to reflect on their work by engaging in earnest and sustained conversations about teaching with their peers", Rogers and Babinski (2002, p. 5) investigated the benefits of establishing "new teacher groups" to provide this missing opportunity for "collaborative conversations". Led by facilitators, 49 new teachers met twice weekly in nine groups to talk about aspects of their on-going life as a teacher. The approach was informed by scholarship on job-embedded professional

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development, learning communities and the development of self-as-teacher. Based on their analysis of a rich array of data (transcripts of group meetings, facilitator field notes, interviews, questionnaires), they identified a number of features of the structure and processes of the groups that contributed to the benefits that most teachers derived from their participation. These features included commitment to confidentiality, an agenda set by participants, non-evaluative facilitators, restriction to beginning teachers, teachers from different schools, meetings held frequently and consistently, a predictable format, no outside preparation required, and meetings held in the teachers' classrooms.

Impact and Implications

So, what has been the impact of such literature on my own views and actions in relation conversation and professional learning? And what might be the implications for others who assist the professional learning of their colleagues?

My knowledge of the nature, place and value of conversation has moved from tacit to explicit and I give much greater status to the place of conversation in (the support of) professional learning. In practical terms, this means that I contrive to make opportunities for conversation more likely, seek out opportunities for conversation and try to avoid moving prematurely from conversation to discussion. The latter is a tendency that many teachers may find difficult to resist. In discussion, one person becomes more influential in shaping the direction and character of talk and there is an associated risk that the other participant(s) find it more difficult to say what is on or in their mind as openness, permissiveness, risk-taking and story-telling diminish.

I have greater appreciation of the significance for my work of the social functions that conversation serves. Often that work involves introducing colleagues who have very diverse discipline and professional backgrounds to scholarship-based ideas about learning and teaching. These colleagues are frequently strangers to one another as well as to me, and for many both the ideas and the disciplines that they are derived from are "strange". Everyday experience confirms that the form of talk that we usually engage in initially when we encounter strangers and wish to get acquainted with them is conversation. Svennevig (2002) proposes that "getting acquainted" talk typically involves self-presentation, initiation of topics and the establishment of common contexts. On the basis of the outcomes of these moves, participants in the conversation then decide whether they can, or want to, establish an interpersonal relationship that will involve some degree of solidarity, (mutual rights and obligations), familiarity (mutual knowledge of personal background) and mutual affect (emotional commitment). I have observed previously, in a paper examining ways of helping health professionals from similarly diverse backgrounds to engage with new ideas, that

> …. conversation may assist … professionals from diverse backgrounds to identify the common ground as well as differences in their respective backgrounds and to recognize a degree of solidarity and commitment in relation to a(n) … agenda. As conversation continues and knowledge of personal backgrounds is enriched, this is likely to assist development of insights into others(s) perspectives, including the reasons why they are considered valid and beneficial. (Haigh & Haigh, 2004, p. 6)

Thus, fulfilment of an important social function can also enable learning.

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I am certainly more appreciative of the potential benefits of story telling in conversations and take account of related scholarship (for example, Boyce, 1996; Fairburn, 2002; McDrury & Alterion, 2002; Skoldberg, 2001; Sole & Wilson, 2002). The benefits now associated with storytelling are wide ranging. For example, Sole and Wilson (2002) note that story-telling in organizational contexts has been identified as a means for sharing norms and values, developing trust and commitment, sharing tacit knowledge, facilitating unlearning and generating emotional connection. Those outcomes are all relevant and central to the working relationship between an academic developer and colleague.

McDrury and Alterio (2002) also offer compelling evidence and arguments for the pervasiveness and significance of story telling, and emphasize its potential to evoke both dialogue and reflection that can engender learning. They have developed a five stage "reflective learning through story telling model" that they apply to facilitate practitioner learning in higher education contexts. The five stages, which involve different meaning-making activities, are story finding, story telling, story expanding, story processing and story reconstructing. Movement through these stages is considered to engage the story teller or listener in increasingly deeper processing that includes the use of reflective processes. While allowing for the possibility of significant learning from story telling or listening that occurs spontaneously in informal settings (for example, during everyday conversation), they argue that the likelihood of learning increases when story telling is a pre-determined activity that takes place in formal contexts. They observe that in informal settings,

> …tellers and listers construct the storytelling as it evolves. When tellers have strong cathartic needs, dialogue on story content is less likely to occur, limiting opportunities for learning. Another factor that impacts on learning potential is related to how listeners respond to tellers' stories. In informal settings, responses tend to be variable and frequently result in listeners sharing their own stories. These stories mirror the feelings and intensity that have been revealed in the tellers' stories. While there may be cathartic release, significant learning is unlikely. (McDrury & Alterio, 2002, p. 51)

McDrury and Alterio use the term "story hijacking" to refer to occasions when the response to one story is another story (response story) rather than dialogue about the original story (response discourse). The former is considered more characteristic of informal settings. In contrast, "In formal settings, processes can be put in place to minimise the occurrence of response stories and maximize dialogue focused on the primary story" (McDrury & Alterio, 2002, p. 53). While these authors favour pre-determined storytelling in formal settings, they do acknowledge that spontaneous, story-telling "frequently has a strong affective motivating force" and there is also "greater freedom for the teller to express unedited ideas, concerns and feelings". Because of the permissiveness and risk-taking that can be associated with conversation, stories told in conversation may be more likely to reveal uncomfortable experiences, ideas, issues and concerns that may be able to be addressed through the relationship. Both of these conditions can increase the odds for productive learning.

Sole and Wilson also observe that a good knowledge-sharing story has two distinctive features.

> …it offers a *streamlined experience*. Good knowledge-sharing stories are elegantly simple. They are designed to make specific points by avoiding peripheral information that distract from the central idea. Like fables and anecdotes, they are stripped of excessive detail. In their simplicity, they can be verbally/orally mediated. They are "tellable", portable, highly "tuck-in-able" into everyday functions and activities. … Second, a knowledge-sharing story offers a *surrogate*

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> *experience*. … when a story is recounted, the narrative form offers the listener an opportunity to experience in a surrogate fashion the situation that was experienced by the storyteller. The listener can acquire understanding of the situation's key concepts and their relationships in the same progressive or cumulative manner that the storyteller acquired that understanding. (Sole & Wilson, 2002, p. 5)

However, my response to stories in conversations is not uncritical. As Sole and Wilson also observe, stories may present "traps" that include

> *Seductiveness*: Stories can be so compelling, so seductive and vivid—either as a result of their rich detail or their eloquent presentation—that the listeners can get absorbed into the "truth" of the story and can have difficulty critically evaluating it as a template for their own experiences.
>
> *Single point of view*: One of the limitations of stories is that they are told from the perspective of one individual. This single point of view may be less directly relevant to the activities and concerns of many other individuals, and thus loses its power to connect with them. (Sole & Wilson, 2002, p. 5)

A related general danger that Lynda Stone (1993) associates with conversation is narcissism. "Narcissisms of experience, voice and self are manifested in exemplars of conversational content: First, 'I did it, so I know it's true.' Second, 'I have a right to my own opinion.' Third, 'I feel it in my gut'" (Stone, 1993, p. 6).

The explicitness of my awareness and knowledge of conversation inevitably means that conversation has also become a focus for my own reflection on practice. That reflection has been enhanced by my encounter with the scholarship on conversation which has given me valuable insights into what I might be thoughtful about and reflect on in relation to conversation (Haigh, 2000). At the same time, I recognize that a tension exists between the notion that conversation is typically serendipitious, unscripted and not directed by one participant and the view that conversation could be a planned element of a professional development programme. Certainly I believe that undue self-consciousness about the moves made as conversation is underway may destroy the essential essence of this form of talk. Theodore Zeldin's observation is apt with reference to this issue.

> The experts can help you understand the mechanisms. But to try to learn to converse better by applying some technique, on the model of Masters and Johnson's instructions on how to be good at sex, won't get you very far. (Zeldin, 1998, p. 9)

However, if the self-consciousness is limited to a decision to either (a) initiate conversation with the hope that it could turn out to be an occasion for learning, or (b) sustain conversation that has begun spontaneously, the defining ingredients should remain intact. That is the stance a colleague and I have taken in relation to a Post Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching programme. Recognizing the potential benefits of conversation, we have indicated explicitly to participants that the occasions when we talk together will almost inevitably be an amalgam of conversation and discussion and that there is parity in the value that we associate with these forms of talk for professional learning. We also comment on the features of both that we believe offer complementary benefits for learning.

I also recognize that my own well-established disposition to ask questions that can facilitate reflection does transfer spontaneously to conversation contexts. It seems reasonable to assume that this may increase the likelihood that my conversations with colleagues will have learning outcomes.

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> When such questioning is facilitative, it prompts practitioners to go beyond their first thoughts and taken for granted ideas about situations and experiences and their own actions (or inactions), to critically examine underpinning beliefs, assumptions and values, and to generate and evaluate their own solutions to their own problems. (Haigh, 2000, p. 92)

When I sense that a conversation is becoming a learning occasion, I may also try to ensure that it will also be memorable. While conversations often have features that make them more likely to be remembered (for example, immediacy, personal relevance, rich stories), associated ideas and information may not linger if there is no record of the talk that can be revisited. Because of the serendipitous character of most conversations, we are often not equipped to take notes and again note-taking may be perceived as an intrusive act that disturbs the nature of the talk and the relationship between participants. Notwithstanding these circumstances and this concern, there are occasions when I take notes as conversation is underway. Again, this is something that I am inclined to do in many dialogue contexts. When on-the-spot note taking is not possible or appropriate, I will often make some personal notes after a conversation and send a copy to the colleague(s) I have been talking with.

As the preceding discussion indicates, I believe that both spontaneous, totally undirected conversations and "guided" conversations can be productive contexts for professional learning. Clearly, these are not discrete categories; rather, they fall along a continuum. It is a matter of professional judgement as to whether any intrusion into the natural dynamics of everyday conversation will reduce the likelihood that the talk will embody the features that make it conducive to such learning (for example, openness, permissiveness, risk-taking).

Finally, there is now a new set of entries in my diary. Previously, all entries referred to planned and scheduled activities. Now, the diary also includes retrospective entries that record my unpremeditated conversations with colleagues. These entries highlight the importance of conversation in my day-to-day work life.

Conclusion

When I reflect on the experiences associated with writing this article and which have been a context for significant professional learning, two features immediately come to mind. First, my everyday conversations with colleagues in New Zealand, Australia, the UK and Canada have been crucial to the evolution of my thoughts about conversation, and I can now appreciate why that has been the case. In particular, the defining attributes of those conversations have ensured that they have been an ideal context for the gestation of ideas that have been new for me. Serendipity, improvisation, an open agenda, permissiveness, and risk-taking are all conditions that are conducive to creativity. As Zeldin observes,

> Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts; they transform them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards; it creates new cards. (Zeldin, 1998, p. 14)

Conversations that have included talk about my emerging ideas have also helped ensure that they have been subject to on-going critique and conversation has also allowed me to explore ways of articulating those ideas.

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The second feature of those experiences is their confirmation of the place and significance of story-telling. Stories (including about conversations) that I have told and listened to during conversation have helped me crystallize and clarify my emerging thoughts. And, the structure underlying this article has a narrative form because I felt that it would be the most appropriate way in which I could share insights and feelings derived from a succession of interconnected personal observations and reflected-on experiences, alongside those derived from literature. In this regard, McEwan and Egan's observation is apt,

> A narrative, and the particular form of narrative that we call a story, deals not just in facts or ideas, or theories, or even dreams, fears and hopes, but in facts, theories and dreams from the perspective of someone's life and in the context of someone's emotion. (McEwan & Egan, 1995, p. viii)

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