A mission possible: towards a shared dialogic space for professional learning in UK higher education

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Abstract

In this paper, we have developed the concept of dialogic space to elaborate our view of the importance of creating future academic practice together in relationship with others in a higher education context. We see scope and potential for the dialogic space as a forum for 'interthinking' to engage the voices of stakeholders in contributing to the development of more democratic understandings about academic practice and reforms in higher education. In the paper, a vignette has been used as a methodological approach to illustrate the possibility of creating such dialogic space. At the end of the paper, wider implications of using dialogic space in professional learning in academic contexts have been discussed.

Key words: professional learning, dialogic space, higher education, academic identity

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Introduction

The concept of learning spaces is one which Savin-Baden (2008) has developed, examining different spaces which include dialogic spaces. Savin-Baden's idea of learning spaces 'includes the physical spaces in which we place ourselves, but what is important, vital even, about learning spaces is that they have a different kind of temporality and different ways of thinking' (Savin-Baden, 2008, 8). We draw on this thinking about learning spaces as we develop our conceptualisation of dialogue within professional learning in academic contexts.

The view of Freire (1976) that 'to be human is to engage in relationships with others and with the world' and Dewey's assertion that 'the very process of living together educates …enlarges and enlightens experiences' (2009, 6) represent ideas which we suggest have particular significance for the policy landscape and discourse of higher education today. Take for example the body of literature on student engagement in higher education. We are writing this paper at a time when as Baron and Corbin (2012) suggest, practices to enhance student engagement are being widely promoted through a 'plethora of policies and practices'. Kahu (2013, 758) identified student engagement as a current buzzword in higher education, noting that Trowler and Trowler's review in 2010 suggested 'the value of engagement is no longer questioned' (Trowler and Trowler 2010, 9 in Kahu 2013). Yet despite the emphasis on student engagement through a 'plethora of policies and practices', nonetheless many academic staff perceive a trend towards student disengagement (Baron and Corbin 2012, 759). We maintain that there is an argument for critical engagement with some of the assumptions and ideas inherent in wider policy reform in higher education, of which student engagement is cited here only as one example. We argue for the role of dialogue in professional learning. In this paper, we would define 'professional learning' with reference to the practices, values, systems and settings relating to the profession in question. Learning can be seen in terms of reception and transmission, then 'professional learning' is reduced to what we would see as 'professionalisation'. If, on the other hand, 'learning' is seen as reflexive, then 'professional learning' should be seen as opening up critical perspectives on the academic practices, received values, bureaucratic systems and institutional settings that define one's own profession. Professions stagnate when they fail to be self-critical; they develop through self-criticism and public accountability. 'Professional learning' is different from 'professionalisation' on the basis that the former focuses on criticality and reflexivity and thereby resists the tendency towards self-interest and self-protection implicit in the latter term. In our view, dialogue plays an important role in achieving genuine profession learning in academia.

Brookfield and Preskill (1999, 5) used the term 'discussion' to encompass discussion, dialogue and conversation. They see discussion as 'an important way for people to affiliate with one another, to develop the sympathies and skills that make participatory democracy possible'. Their work develops our thinking about dialogic space as nurturing human growth through collaboration because 'only through collaboration and co-operation with others can we be exposed to new points of view' (3). The liveliest interactions, they maintain, are critical and for us this is a key point. Fullan (1995, 257) has emphasised, in the same way as Brookfield and Preskill do, the importance of open mindedness within effective collaboration for learning 'people need one another to learn and to accomplish things'. Similarly Brookfield and Preskill (1999, 6) suggest that 'one of the defining characteristics of critical discussion is that participants are willing to enter the conversation with open minds'.

In this paper we develop the idea of the dialogic space as the site for dialogue to occur at the level of self (internal dialogue) and at the level of connected 'interthinking' (Littleton and Mercer 2013) in collaboration with others. Experience is rethought and reinterpreted in the dialogic space.

The vignette we have included is an exemplar dialogic approach to academic professional learning in higher education. Its purpose here is to give practical expression to the relationship between professional dialogue and professional learning in academic contexts. It also prompts discussion of possible tensions between reconciling free flowing conversations about academic practice with the requirement that such conversations be referenced against national benchmark descriptors. How can the latter co-exist with genuine dialogue for professional growth?

Conceptualising dialogic space

In this paper we examine – the creation of a 'shared space' for academic professional learning. This 'space' is viewed as dialogic, relational and connected. Nixon et al., (1996, 135) remind us that:

> 'There is no solitary learning: we can only create our worlds together. The unfolding agency of the self always grows out of the interaction with others. It is inescapably a social creation. We can only develop as persons with and through others; the conception of the self presupposes an understanding of what we are to become and this always unfolds through our relationship with others.'

The relational aspects of the dialogic space as a site for academic professional learning form an important part of our conceptualisation and analysis. It is, to draw from Savin-Baden's work (2008, 8), a space where 'the values of being are more central than the values of doing' and where 'one can hear things differently'. Savin-Baden's notion of different forms of learning spaces in higher education includes space for dialogue. We accept Savin-Baden's conceptualisation of dialogic spaces as 'spaces in which critical conversations occur and ones where change and challenge take place' and in the context of the concerns of this paper, we apply this thinking to dialogue between academics and their peer mentors which engages both in challenge and co-creation of knowledge about practice.

In their discussion of academic dialogue, Light et al (2009) consider models of 'academic self', one of which is a relational model. This model is inherently dialogic and relational, acknowledging the power of association with others for shared experience and the development of thinking. This relational model 'constructs a genuine dialogue by extending value to others as colleagues, recognizing that self, other and community are locations of human worth' (Light et al. 2009, 41). Light et al. connect the relational model to academic dialogue. Through informed academic exchange with others we 'reflect with purpose' and develop our practices. Su and Wood (2012) pointed to the importance of connecting with students' understandings in the development of academic practice, in the same way in which Light et al.'s relational model is founded on a commitment to 'integrate the whole of academic practice within the larger context of continuous learning' and this includes the importance of research into teaching practices with one's students and colleagues (Light et al. 2009, 42).

Spoken language plays an important part in the process of collective thought, captured in the concept of 'interthinking' (Littleton and Mercer, 2013). In this process of 'thinking together', spoken language is an 'enabling' tool, whereby talking about and sharing experience aids learning and contributes to the development of creative thinking, 'social reasoning' and understanding. Interthinking is a sense-making process through talking together to solve problems and make joint sense of the world (Littleton and Mercer 2013, 115). It is the use of talk 'to pursue collective intellectual activity… whereby people can combine their intellectual resources to achieve more through working together than any individual could do on their own' (Littleton and Mercer 2013, 111). Fullan (1995, 257) sees collaboration as an essential ingredient in personal learning. His reconceptualisation of professional development for teachers includes 'locating, listening to, and articulating your inner voice'. We argue later on that the development of the inner voice of 'the teacher within ourselves' (Parker Palmer, 1997, 9) which we refer to as an inner dialogue and a source of personal strength, is an important element of the dialogic space alongside the dialogue with peer colleagues. Littleton and Mercer afford a special role to language in interthinking 'because it enables people to engage in reasoned dialogue' (112). Bakhtin

(1986, 121) suggested that dialogue and meaning are linked, referring to the 'layering of meaning upon meaning, voice upon voice, strengthening through merging… the combination of many voices… that augments understanding'. This relationship between voices in dialogue is interesting and relevant for the development of our conceptualisation of academic dialogue. In his examination of Bakhtin's ideas, Wegerif (2008, 353) points to the dialogic space as one 'within which self and other mutually construct and reconstruct each other'. Thus we conceptualise this peer-enabled professional dialogic process of thinking and learning together as one of 'encounter'. Through this deliberative and planned dialogic encounter with a peer, thinking is probed and extended and creative problem-solving, reasoning and enquiry take place. Through this encounter the practitioner interprets and develops deeper understandings of their academic practice. Wegerif (2008) refers to the work of Barnes in the 1970s concerning talk in schools. Barnes (1975, 30) wrote about the importance of 'Learning by Talking' for the purposes of enabling the learner 'to grasp principles and to use the new knowledge as a means of recoding former experience'. Barnes affirms the importance of 'speech as reflection' and his writing, whilst concerned with children's speech, offers useful insights into the role of language in reshaping and interpreting experience:

> 'If we know what we know, then we can change it. Language is not the same as thought, but it allows us to reflect upon our thoughts. The metaphor contained in 'reflect' is here highly appropriate: what we say and write mirrors our thought processes, and enables us to take responsibility for them. Thus children and adults alike are not only receiving knowledge but remaking it for themselves'. (Barnes 1975, 19-20)

A vignette as a methodological approach - Academic as student

Miles and Huberman (1994, 81) explain the use of the vignette within qualitative research, conceptualising it as 'a focused description' of events with a narrative quality, normally bounded in time and scope. Barter and Renold (2002) discuss the use of vignettes in qualitative research and the application of this technique within an integrated approach to research seeking to represent participants' explanations of their experiences. What follows has some of the characteristics of the vignette, in that it seeks to describe the experience at one higher education institution which has developed a 'dialogic' focus for its continuing professional development framework for academic staff. The scenario illustrates a model of professional learning through peer-supported dialogue. The vignette provides a systematic approach to description and exploration and is structured into three aspects, the first of which provides some contextual background and account of dialogue as a professional learning process, the second aspect deals with the rationale and purposes of dialogue and finally reflections are offered on learning space and student engagement.

As discussed above, we recognise that the vignette has many uses in qualitative empirical research and therefore its role within a paper such as this, which is more of a conceptual and theoretical discussion, may merit a little further explanation. Here the device is used primarily as a means by which to illustrate how the concepts and theoretical perspectives can be applied in higher education. The purposes are therefore to suggest to the reader, through illustration in a higher education context, that our mission to create dialogic spaces may be possible and realised through our practices. We therefore argue for a role for the vignette in a primarily conceptual paper when employed in this way.

The context is a university in England and the focus is learning related to the academic role. The university has developed a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Framework for the institution. This Framework brings together a range of CPD activities for academic staff into a coherent model with clear links to Higher Education Academy recognition and the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF). It is chosen for this vignette because it illuminates the concept of engagement of staff in higher education as learners through a professional dialogue. This CPD Framework, based on professional dialogue, was inspired by a research study into the use of reflective professional dialogue as reported in ESCalate News (Pilkington 2010), the interim findings from which suggested that 'dialogue provides a rigorous process for assessing and supporting learning, and is extremely effective'. The research also found that 'the dynamic and flexible nature of dialogue allows probing, and detailed examination appropriate to expose reflection on practice and professional learning' (Pilkington 2011).

The professional academic dialogue is between peers. The preparation leading up to the final dialogue is a peer-mentored process in which the mentor supports thinking and preparation of the mentee for the final dialogue. The final dialogue is assessed by a peer assessor against the UKPSF, informed by evidence of aspects of the practitioner's pedagogic practice which is collated in a professional development portfolio.

The rationale for the model is informed by the work of Brockbank and McGill (2007, 65) who refer to reflective dialogue as something that 'engages the person at the edge of their knowledge, their sense of self and the world as experienced by them. Thus their assumptions about knowledge, themselves and their world is challenged.' It is through this reflectively critical learning process that new understandings emerge (Brockbank and McGill 2007). Dialogue can take different forms. It can be internal or between individuals and with others (Brockbank and McGill 2007, 66). In the dialogic model of professional learning which is the subject of this vignette, the dialogue is purposeful and planned and the institutional CPD Framework makes clear the expectation that through the dialogue individuals will be challenged to explore values and assumptions which underpin their pedagogic practice and encouraged to reflect critically on this.

It is a truism that dialogue prioritises language and this dialogic model of professional learning can be set within a socio-cultural approach. In the work of Mercer (1995, 4) and Littleton and Mercer (2013), talk has an important role within social thinking. Language can be used to share and construct knowledge about experience and Mercer (1995, 4) draws on the work of Vygotsky to develop his explanation of the relationship between language and thought:

> 'By describing language as a social mode of thinking, I can draw attention to two important ways in which language is related to thought. One is that language is a vital means by which we represent our own thoughts to ourselves. The Russian psychologist Vygotsky described language as a *psychological* tool, something each of us uses to make sense of experience. Language is also our essential *cultural* tool - we use it to share experience and so to collectively, jointly, make sense of it... Language is therefore not just a means by which individuals can formulate ideas and communicate them, it is also a means for people to think and learn together.'

The CPD model we have drawn on is based on professional learning through engaging participants in critically reflective academic dialogue. This engagement is through participant reflection with a peer on the participant's experience and as such the dialogue is interactive and 'engages the participants' realities as opposed to that which is simply didactic' (Brockbank and McGill 2007, 67). Critical thinking about experience is an important intention behind the dialogue, the purpose of which is to be a learning experience rather than simply a conversation. Critical thinking can be seen as part of a 'sense-making' process, i.e. making sense of and learning from experience. This leads us to the idea of 'connected ways of knowing' having importance within the dialogue, drawing further on Brockbank and McGill's work which relates connected knowing to reflective dialogue and suggests that 'with connected knowing the dialogue is about understanding what the person is saying - their experience.' (Brockbank and McGill 2007, 69). In the model at this institution, the academic dialogue is an interactive and critically reflective process aimed at illuminating aspects of the experience of the learner in their own context. Brockbank and McGill affirm the central importance of context and Moon (2005, 12) suggests a relationship between critical thinking and context specificity:

> 'The fully developed capacity to think critically relies on an understanding of knowledge as constructed and related to its context (relativistic) and it is not possible if knowledge is viewed only in an absolute manner (i.e. knowledge as a series of facts)'.

Dialogic space demands a 'different kind of consciousness' and one of the differences is that it is not a space in which arguments are won or lost as ideas are batted to and fro and

points are scored (Bohm 1996). Dialogic space is not one in which we are primarily concerned to 'persuade' others or to 'prove' a point:

> 'In a dialogue, nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins. There is a different sort of spirit to it, In a dialogue there is no attempt to gain points or to make your particular view prevail… a dialogue is something more of a common participation, in which we are not playing a game against each other, but with each other'. (Bohm 1996, 7)

Bohm refers here to the 'spirit' of dialogue and this idea has influenced our conception of dialogic space. In the dialogic space we are more concerned with exploring perceptions of meanings rather than proving 'truths' and, drawing on Bohm's conceptualisation, this is inherent in the 'spirit' of dialogue. Bohm (1996) contends that in dialogue meaning 'flows' as it is shared through a process of 'thinking together'. In the dialogic space we become 'mirrors' for one another's thoughts and rather than being preoccupied with proving or with convincing others, its point is that it probes the thought processes behind our assumptions (Bohm 1996). This appears to us to be a profoundly democratic practice, rather in the way perhaps that it does to Brookfield and Preskill (1999, 3) who suggested that 'democracy and discussion imply a process of giving and taking, speaking and listening, describing and witnessing - all of which help expand horizons and foster mutual understanding'.

In the dialogic space, knowledge is 'constructed and related to its context rather than viewed in an absolute manner' (Moon 2005, 12). Through engagement in 'connected knowing' in the dialogic space, we see the learner coming to 'know in a different way than they did before' (Kreber 2013).

The idea of connected forms of knowing in the dialogic space emerges as a potentially powerful form of professional learning. We are aware of potential challenges of creating this shared space, in order to foster a genuine dialogue. The institutional conditions need to be in place to enable realisation of this shared space as places where such an engagement can take place. We remain hopeful that the mission is possible.

This mission is conceptualised as linked to the wider mission and vision of the purposes of higher education. Engagement through higher order critical thinking and intellectual challenge are inherent features of the professional dialogic process examined in the vignette. These are features too we believe of the purposes of higher education. In the dialogic space as we conceptualise it, there is excitement about new ideas, innovative and critical thinking and intellectual courage to challenge and take risks in developing ideas and arguments. The dialogic space gives the learner agency and freedom to do this.

Discussion: wider implications of using dialogic space in professional learning

There can be tensions between the dialogue as a free-flowing, genuine interaction with a peer and which connects with the self of the academic, and dialogue which is reduced to a conversation referenced against external benchmarks of 'best practice' and the passing on of prescriptions for 'what works'. This idea is conveyed in writing of Parker Palmer (1997) whose discussion of 'teaching beyond technique' makes us mindful of how professional dialogue can be contrary to a spirit of learning through enquiry when the method *du jour* is taken for granted as the modus operandi, making colleagues feel they have 'to measure up to norms not their own'. Parker Palmer (1997, 2) recalls the words used by a student to describe 'bad teachers' by whom she had been taught: 'their words float somewhere in front of their faces, like the balloon in speech cartoons.' Applying this idea to the professional dialogue, we contend that the dialogic space has a difficult balance to achieve. Academic practice needs to engage critically with the institutional and external policy agendas but it must weave this into a discussion about the development of practice which is not formulaic. To do otherwise renders practice empty and bereft. The dialogue becomes someone else's words which, to use the student's term again, 'float somewhere in front of our faces' but from which we feel somehow disconnected. Parker Palmer captures this idea well in the notion of divorcing 'personhood' from practice: 'though the academy claims to value multiple modes of knowing, it honours only one - an "objective" way of knowing that takes us into the "real" world by taking us "out of ourselves'. (6)

Our conceptualisation of the dialogic space is as somewhere to 'find our own words' and to weave our own philosophies of practice with the voices of others in our dialogic community. Through this process of finding our own voices and 'the teacher within ourselves', academics have a stronger sense of 'authorising' their own practices 'rather than playing a scripted role at great remove from their own hearts' (Palmer 1997, 9). As mentioned previously, Fullan (1995, 257) suggests that collaboration is an essential capacity for professional learning, suggesting that 'there is a ceiling effect to how much we can learn if we keep it to ourselves.' The importance of linking professional dialogue with authorising professional practice has emerged as a significant idea. Parker Palmer (1997, 9) suggests that 'in a culture of objectification and technique we often confuse authority with power, but the two are not the same. Power works from the outside in, but authority works from the inside out'. The idea of 'empowerment' is important to emphasise in defining the dialogic space. In finding their own words and authorising their own voices, we argue that academics are empowered to engage critically with, rather than be subservient to 'norms not their own' and 'the method *du jour* insisted upon'. Our argument is that it is the power of the 'inner dialogue' to connect through the peer-supported professional dialogue to other forms of knowing, thinking about and referencing 'best

practice' in ways which can empower and extend our development as professional educators:

> 'External tools of power have occasional utility in teaching, but they are no substitute for authority, the authority that comes from the teacher's inner life. The clue is in the word itself, which has "author" as its core. Authority is granted to people who are perceived as "authoring" their own words, their own actions, their own lives, rather than playing a scripted role at great remove from their own hearts. When teachers depend on the coercive powers of law or technique, they have no authority at all.' (Parker Palmer 1997, 9).

Cook-Sather (2002) considers power dynamics in her concern to authorise students' views in discussions about educational reform. She notes that 'the root of the terms that underlie the following discussion — authorize, authority, author, and authoritative — is power: 'the ability to take one's place in whatever discourse is essential to action and the right to have one's part matter' (Heilbrun 1988, 18 in Cook-Sather 2002). Authority is seen by Parker Palmer in terms of empowerment from the inside and we contend that this happens through the connected conversations with peers and development of an informed and critically reflective professional sense of self. However, we agree with Fullan (1995) that there is a need to maintain an open-mindedness in order for this to be most productive as a learning experience. We liken this to the idea we drew from Bakhtin's work, of dialogue as 'conversation and inquiry'. The self in community with others emerges as a key component of the dialogic space, and our emphasis throughout has been on the relational aspects of the development of professional learning:

> 'The self can only find its identity in and through others and membership of communities. The possibility of shared understanding requires individuals not only to value others but to create the communities in which mutuality and thus the conditions for learning can flourish'. (Nixon et al., 1996, 135)

Conclusion

We have developed the concept of dialogic space to elaborate our view of the importance of creating future academic practice together in relationship with others. We see scope and potential for the dialogic space as a forum for 'interthinking' (Littleton and Mercer 2013) to engage the voices of stakeholders in contributing to the development of more democratic understandings about academic practice and reforms in higher education. We drew on the work of Brookfield and Preskill (1999) who as we have seen, thought about discussion as a tool for creating affiliation with others and furthering the purposes of participatory democracy. They therefore assert that 'discussion and democracy are inseparable because both have the same root purpose - to nurture and promote human growth" (Brookfield and

Preskill 1999, 3). This helped us to develop the notion that dialogic space can be the place where collective wisdom grows - something which Brookfield and Preskill suggest would be impossible to achieve on one's own. This is reminiscent of the idea of Nixon et al., (1996, 135) of mutuality and shared understanding. We can only develop as persons, they say, with and through others. We also see the dialogic space as a place where each finds and is authorised to have their own voice rather than, for example, a place where the language of policy discourse is uncritically appropriated. We have drawn on Bakhtin's work and the scholarship of Wegerif in helping us to understand something of Bakhtin's ideas about dialogue. Wegerif (2008) discusses the concept of 'ventriloquation' which is a process whereby learners appropriate the words of others. The uncritical assimilation of the language of policy discourse can gradually and invidiously permeate our thought and speech and an important role we see for the dialogic space is to operate as a site to problematise and critique the accepted wisdom, the 'methodological reductionism' or the 'method of the moment' (Palmer, 1997) from which we may feel some sense of disconnect.

We conclude on an optimistic note. Rowland (2000, 61) proclaimed that 'it is exciting to engage with people who have different ideas and ways of looking at the world' and we have developed a conceptualisation of engaged professional learning through dialogue as an exciting opportunity to reconnect with ourselves and to collaborate with colleagues and stakeholders. This excitement derives from a reconnection with the idea of learning through collaboration in community. As Fullan (1995, 257) points out, on the smaller stage, 'collaboration involves the attitudes and abilities needed to form productive mentoring and peer relationships' and on the larger scale it is about 'the ability to work in organizations that form cross-institutional partnerships … as well as global relationships with individuals and organizations from other cultures'. We see the potential of dialogue to connect with others in these ways, inviting their voices into conversations to develop understandings of academic practice.

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