

# What we talk about when we talk about education: the private and public educational talk of teachers in schools

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One of the central challenges for a school is the creation of a public discourse which expresses the shared purpose of the school community, without losing the multiple and different voices within the teaching staff. In this article we report on the generative potential of educational conversation, when it is structured around questions which allow teachers to reflect on their best teaching selves in past practice and to project those selves into future situations. We suggest that within the staff, the public relating of teaching narratives, and the reflective conversation to which they give rise, constitutes a public and collective form of enquiry into teaching and learning. We argue that reflective conversation is dependent upon critical listening, where the listener is open to what is being said, but is also prepared to ask questions that open up the topic of teaching and learning in ways that are revelatory for both speaker and listener.

## Background

The work reported in this article was undertaken with teachers in a co-educational second-level school, in an urban setting, over the course of the academic year, 2002/2003. Involvement in the project, which formed part of the school's programme of professional development, was voluntary and 41 of the 50, fulltime teachers participated. The aims of the project were: (a) to encourage teachers to enquire into their teaching and to share their insights with their colleagues, in a series of focused conversation; and (b) to develop a model of professional development that encouraged an educational discourse that was 'open and potentiating', future-oriented and linked to past success and achievement (Bowie 1993, p. 47).

## Our context

In May 2002, the Second Level Support Service, with whom we both work, published a discussion document, which set out its vision of continuous professional development (CPD). Among the key statements were the following:

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The professional development of teachers is about teachers enquiring into their own practice; it is about recognising the fact that it is teachers who, in their daily encounters with their students, re-create the curriculum. (SLSS Discussion Document, 2002, p. 2)

Professional Development refers to learning opportunities that engage teachers' creative and reflective capacities to strengthen their practice. (Bredeson & Johansson, 2000, in SLSS Discussion Document 2002, p. 3)

The one-off in-service sessions designed to impart the 'right way' of doing something are being replaced by more sustained, coherent, inquiry-based programmes. Attempts are being made to bring teachers' and schools' development needs together so that individuals feel personally and professionally fulfilled while whole-school improvement occurs. (Stoll & Fink, 1996, in SLSS Discussion Document, 2002, p. 2.)

Our work with the teachers, upon which this article is based, is informed by the understanding of continuous professional development expressed in the above quotations. Our work is intended to create opportunities for our colleagues to enquire into their own practice. Our hypothesis is that, given the opportunity to relate narratives of their best teaching to listeners who are fellow teachers, and given the willingness of the listeners to ask questions that open up the teaching situation, the process of narration, questioning and thoughtful conversation will both catch and create a reality of teaching, from the teachers' perspective, and encourage a conscious shaping of future teaching situations in line with the best experiences of the past. Furthermore, we believe that the creation of a public space in which individual teachers can express their vision of teaching can influence the development of a school's public discourse on education.

### **Our assumptions**

Underpinning our work are a number of assumptions concerning both teaching and enquiry.

In relation to teaching, we, like Schön (1995), regard teaching as something that is active, personal and unpredictable. We share the view that the knowledge generated by teachers and students is both practical and performative—knowledge that is created and re-created in the daily encounters of the classroom, knowledge that is, therefore, contingent, transient and, as Shulman (1998) points out, subject to loss and forgetting; and knowledge which is often unconscious and unacknowledged by those who create it. Furthermore, we believe that classroom knowledge is social and relational in character.

As regard enquiry, we believe that enquiry has the potential to make the familiar unfamiliar and, therefore, visible and open to questioning. Furthermore, as Gadamer (1982) suggests, the indeterminacy that questioning causes is what, ultimately, allows for understanding and change. However, in working with the teaching staff in a school, we want to ensure that in making the familiar visible and memorable, it is remembered for reasons that contribute to the strengthening of the professional identity of the teacher-enquirers. We do not want to invoke the negative associations

of enquiry as a form of examination and appraisal, as outlined in Ball (1990), a form of judgement and inspection, something used by those in power to discipline those over whom they preside. Furthermore, we do not want enquiry to be associated with the confessional and the revelation of personal shortcomings and failures. Therefore, in setting up the project, we were determined to create opportunities for what Ludema (2001) refers to as 'appreciative enquiry', a form of conversation in which the participants are mutually supportive and bound to each other by a relation of professional friendship and interest. Through these conversations, we hoped that a 'mutual visibility' would come into being and a commensurate 'disposability'—a willingness to place insights and best practice at each other's disposal (Barth, 1990, p. 29). We believe that through the creation of teaching narratives, and a questioning of these narratives, teachers can make conscious 'the pedagogical qualities or virtues that can give coherence, purpose and meaning' to their teaching (Van Manen, 1994, p. 160). And where this process is undertaken in conversation, where there is an equal commitment to pursue the subject of the talk and to maintain the relationship between the speakers, what Burbules (1993) calls the dialogical relation, the creation of a professional identity becomes, in effect, a collaborative activity.

A further assumption we make, in working with all the teachers in a school, is that the teaching staff contains within itself, many of the resources, experience, and insights necessary to address the challenges posed in meeting the educational needs of students.

### **Starting point: a collective image of the teacher and teaching**

Often, as Leonard (2003) points out, the teacher is divided, caught between a public and a private articulation of the teaching self, within the organisation of school. Consequently, when we met the staff for the first time, we issued an invitation to each of our colleagues to create an image of him or herself, by answering two questions, 'What do you enjoy about teaching and learning?' and 'What do you see as your strengths as a teacher?' It was our hope that, in answering these questions, the teachers would contribute to the continuing project of creating their professional self-narrative.

What is striking about the responses to these questions is the confidence and enthusiasm displayed by almost every member of the teaching staff. By gathering and assembling these various individual statements, we created an aggregated or collective image of the teacher, composed of a multiplicity of viewpoints. Our concept of assemblage was influenced by Payne's (1997) interpretation of the work of Deleuze. According to this assemblage a teacher is someone: who is strongly committed to the students; who enjoys seeing students progress and develop; who loves his/her subject; who wishes to involve all students in learning; who gives feedback to the students on their work; who is patient, open, friendly, concerned, and tolerant; who is humorous, positive, fair and consistent; who is hard-working, resilient, creative; and who is willing to learn. This collective image is expressive and

personal and associates teaching with relationships, with optimism, and with possibility.

From our perspective, this image, this assemblage, was a way of mediating between the internal and the external world, between, on the one hand, the world of private thought, private conversation and the almost invisible action of the individual teacher in the classroom, and, on the other hand, the public and visible world of staff discourse and meetings. A question we wished to pursue was the relationship between this collective image, the personal self-talk that generated it, and the public self-talk or discourse of the institution.

In our first meeting, we invited the teachers to consider two further questions; ‘What do you see as a challenge for you as teacher, in the coming year?’, ‘Over the next year, what areas of your teaching would you like to concentrate on and develop?’ In asking these questions we were, following Gadamer (1983), intent on creating a dialogic situation governed by the logic of question and answer.

The response to these questions helped us to identify three broad areas of concern: Mixed Ability Teaching; Developing a Range of Teaching Styles and Encouraging the Reluctant Learner. Indeed, the overarching concern was the engagement of all students in learning.

Before inviting the teachers to begin work within one of these areas, we invited them to recall a best moment from their teaching and to relate it to a colleague. The listener was invited to identify the qualities that were evident in the narrator, on the basis of the narrative. We hoped that these conversations would facilitate a multiplicity of narratives and a kind of listening that went beyond recognising what was being spoken about to considering its nature and meaning. We hoped that the talk would be engaged and concerned with possibility. We wanted talk that was focused on what teachers do when they teach. We wanted people to experience ‘the valuable social satisfaction’ of having your practice sanctioned by a colleague (Britton, 1969, p. 96). For the most part what occurred was a series of conversations that, in their emphasis on best moments, made visible the existing insights and knowledge within the staff, the very resources that would allow them to address, with confidence and energy, the three areas of concern. In these conversations we were encouraging teachers to remember their best teaching selves and to use this memory as a guide for future action (see Connelly & Clandinin, 1988 and Shulman, 1998).

### **Appreciative conversation**

In setting up the project, we invited teachers to join one of three groups, corresponding to the three areas of concern. These focus groups had a large cross-subject membership. Over a four-week period, individuals used the area of interest as a lens to reflect on their teaching and, in pairs and small groups, shared their stories, concentrating on what worked well and what they would do differently.

The decision to start with small groups or pairs was deliberate, as we wanted to create situations in which the communication between people would be conversa-

tional in nature and, consequently, there would be the likelihood that each participant would experience the talk as supportive. Of course, in setting up situations of conversation between self-selecting pairs, there was the danger that the interaction might amount to no more than a cosy chat, what James Britton refers to 'a nice warm dip together in comfortable beliefs' (Britton, 1969, p. 85). The intention was to go beyond this, to make the everyday world of the classroom the subject of description, in the first instance ('Tell us your story'), and then the subject of thoughtful and critical attention, ('What worked well?' 'What would you do differently?') The engagement with these latter two questions requires an intellectual adventurousness. And the meaning and sense-making that arises from pursuing them, will, of course, be conditional and hypothetical, for as Greene, expresses it, 'there are always multiple perspectives and multiple vantage points ... (and) no accounting ... can ever be finished or complete' (Greene, 2002, p. 135).

We cannot claim that in the first instances of appreciative conversation, all participants created a narrative of their teaching and went on to reflect on this narrative. However, there was evidence of real engagement among the participants and the emphasis on the asking of questions created the dynamic and the potential for future conversations to develop into more searching forms of enquiry, a view borne out by the first set of evaluations from the project, where teachers described the conversations with colleagues, as 'helpful', 'interesting' and 'useful'. Final evaluations welcomed the opportunity to: reflect on teaching; share ideas; clarify strategies; discuss issues with a colleague and learn from colleagues. For some teachers, the conversations with colleagues were described as 'motivating'. For others the conversations made them aware of their own good practice.

Schollmeier (1994, p. 26) reminds us that, for Aristotle, moral virtue was a habit concerned with the exercise of choice. What we hope we have initiated is an activity that might become a habit, and this habit, might, in turn, cause the participants to choose the activity, to engage in further conversation on teaching and learning, conversation informed by the questions, 'what worked well?' and 'what would you do differently?' And when conversations take off, in pursuit of questions, there is no knowing where they will lead. As Gadamer notes:

The way in which one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own turnings and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the people conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows what will 'come out' in a conversation. (Gadamer, 1982, p. 345)

More radically, Felman (1987) suggests that analytic dialogue is not an exchange of pre-existing knowledge but the condition of teaching and learning because 'knowledge ... is not contained by an individual but comes about out of the mutual apprenticeship between two partially unconscious speeches that both say more than they know' (p. 83). Moreover, in our experience, not only do teachers say more than they know, but, frequently, they also know more than they say. We do not think it is

an exaggeration to state that teaching and learning are rarely spoken about in a public way in schools and remain largely invisible. And, as long as this remains the case, a school's ability to cope with change will be diminished.

### **Making talk public**

Originally, we thought to invite members of staff to share the results of their enquiries into teaching and learning, in their classrooms, with all their colleagues, at the next staff day. However, we soon realised that there was little willingness, among individual teachers, to do this. Talking with one or two colleagues was fine, but the prospect of making public their enquiries, at a meeting of all the staff, was a cause of anxiety.

We turned to Greene's discussion of internal and external freedom in attempting to understand this disjunction between the private and public. Greene supports Arendt's view of internal freedom as an illusion, because it denies action and interaction in the public world (Greene, 2002, p. 129). For Arendt, 'inner freedom' is no more than a space to which we flee from external coercion. In these terms, could staff meetings be seen as coercive? Could the conversations between two or three colleagues be seen as a space to which people fled, away from more public forms of interaction? Of course we have no real way of knowing if this is the case. We offer these questions as hypotheses, as starting points.

In exploring the issue of making enquiry public, one member of staff remarked that routines, administration and rules were likely to be discussed at staff meetings, but there was little likelihood that teaching and learning would be discussed. We do not think that this emphasis is unique to staff meetings in any particular school. However, we do think it is worth asking why a school's public discourse should confine itself to a small, if important, range of educational issues, primarily disciplinary in character? Felman (1987, p. 71) highlights a passage in Freud's writing, where he considers the manner in which education handles and structures discipline:

The child must learn to control his instincts. It is impossible to give him liberty to carry out all his impulses without restriction . . . Accordingly, education must inhibit, forbid and suppress, and this is abundantly seen in all periods of history.

Given the preoccupation with rules, routines and administration, might the schools' educational discourse, its public self-talk, as it were, be characterised as a disciplinary discourse? And if this discourse is the dominant one at staff meetings, is there the danger that it will play a determining role in defining teaching and learning? If a school is to create a public discourse on education that is capacious enough to include the viewpoints and creativity of individual teachers, then it needs to work on a broader base than the disciplinary aspects of teaching and learning. It needs to include, *inter alia*, the relational, the personal and the expressive. And this is where the potential of the image or ideal of teaching, assembled from the private self-talk of teachers, becomes evident. Where a school works to bridge the gap between its

public self-talk and the self-talk of individual teachers, there is a greater likelihood that its public discourse will be expressive, optimistic and hopeful. (We share David Halpin's (2003) opinion on the importance of hope in education.) And this is a central aim of our work—working with the teachers to create a public space in which the individual teacher might air his/her insights (and questions) on teaching and learning in ways that expand the school's public discourse on education and make it capable of supporting the multiple voices that constitute it.

### **What do we talk about when we talk about education? Finding a language**

One of the reactions to the first round of conversations on teaching and learning was that there was nothing new in this; it was something that took place all the time between colleagues. And in some regards this is true. However, we wanted to encourage the conversationalists to enquire as they conversed, to pursue questions, to put ideas, as Gadamer (1982) describes it, into play. Therefore, we wanted to develop a habit of critical listening, where the listener was open to what was being said, but was also prepared to ask questions that opened up the topic of teaching and learning in ways that were potentially revelatory, in ways that kept the conversation going. We wanted the specimen questions, 'What worked well?' and 'What would you do differently?' to cause this opening out. By encouraging teachers to engage in conversations that were structured around these questions, we wanted them to demonstrate to themselves the worth and feasibility of educative conversation, with a view to proposing that these kinds of conversation might feature regularly at staff meetings.

However, even with the limited experience to date, we realise that listening and asking questions, and learning to ask the same question in different ways, so that the question is not lost in the circularity and iteration of conversation, is an art that needs to be practised, if it is to develop. And what part, if any, we should play in the development of the art of generative questioning among the staff, is something to which we need to give further consideration. To date we have done a little work with a small group teachers (home-school teacher; guidance counsellor, chaplain) who facilitated meetings of six to seven of their colleagues, in which the participants told their stories and responded to questions on their work. Where it is developed, the art of questioning can, as Gadamer (1982, pp. 330–331) points out, bring out the real strength of what is being narrated.

Another reaction to the first round of conversation was the view that young teachers had a language for talking about teaching and learning that was not shared by more established teachers. We believe, however, that the combination of expressive, personal narrative and the reflection that questions give rise to are, in themselves, capable of generating understanding and interpretation, especially when the narrative is structured around 'best moments'.

### **Future directions**

Teaching and learning are central to everything that happens in school, but they are not always central to a school's public discourse. For the participants in the project, the engagement in conversing around teaching and learning became, in itself, persuasive—teachers seeing the value of their conversations and making suggestions as to how these conversations might be forwarded in more public contexts. Thus, for example, a teacher suggested having subject meetings at different times in the school year, when book lists and class lists were not a pressing necessity. In this way, the three specimen questions—‘How can we engage all the students in learning?’, ‘What works well?’ and ‘What would I/we do differently?’—could be pursued by a group of colleagues teaching the same subject.

We see a progression in this. At the outset, we invited individual teachers to engage in personal and private reflection on their work. This was followed by conversations among pairs or small groups of teachers. The outcomes of these conversations were then related, in a more formal way, within groups of seven or eight teachers. Thus, a public space was created for the articulation of individual and paired reflection. In addition, the public relating of teaching narratives, and the reflective conversation to which they gave rise, constituted a public and collective form of enquiry into teaching and learning. And just as the teachers made suggestions for establishing more collective forms of enquiry into teaching and learning, within subject departments, we hope that parallel suggestions might be made in relation to other fora within the school, such as the regular meetings between year-heads and tutors, and the weekly meeting between the principal, deputy and assistant principals.

The teaching staff is at the beginning of a process. We believe that the process, the pursuit of the three archetypal questions, has the potential to enrich the school's public discourse on education; to create a strong sense of shared purpose among teachers (‘How to engage all the students in learning?’); and to bridge the gap between the private self-talk of teachers and the public self-talk of the institution, without losing the multiple and differing voices within the teaching staff. Our work to date has been intended to enable greater possibilities of different, public expressions of teaching. It is informed by an optimism in relation to teachers and teaching and an optimism in relation to the generative potential of conversation, when it is structured around questions that allow teachers to reflect on their best teaching selves in past practice and to project those selves into future situations.

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