

Towards a shared dialogic space for professional learning in higher education

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The context of the study

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. We examine the creation of a 'shared space' for academic professional learning. This 'space' is viewed as dialogic, relational and connected. Savin-Baden's conceptualisation of dialogic spaces is seen 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.

The methodology approach

This paper is more of a conceptual and theoretical discussion of developing the concept of a shared dialogic space. In order to illustrate how our concept and theoretical perspective can be potentially applied in higher education, we adopted the use of the vignette as a methodological approach. The purposes of the vignette are therefore to suggest to the reader, through illustration in a higher education context, that creating dialogic spaces may be possible and realised through our practices.

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.

The context of the vignette is a university in England and the focus is learning related to the academic role. It is chosen for this vignette because it illuminates the concept of engagement of staff in higher education as learners through a professional dialogue between peers.

Conceptual arguments

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’. 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.

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). 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.

The implications of the study

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 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. 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.

References

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