

Reflective Piece

Learning to teach in higher education: Integrating informal conversations in a formal programme of academic development

Hyleen Mariaye

ORCID: 0000-0002-4002-3712

Majhegy Murden-Louise

ORCID: 0000-0003-4275-5375

Shalini Ramasawmy

ORCID: 0000-0002-0657-1889

Mauritius Institute of Education

Mauritius Institute of Education

Mauritius Institute of Education

h.mariaye@mieonline.org

Majhegy.Murden-Louise@mie.ac.mu

j.ramasawmy@mie.ac.mu

ABSTRACT

This paper reflectively analyses how informal conversational spaces can be pedagogically integrated in a formal structured learning space. We document innovative practice in faculty development by introducing elements of informal conversations, understood as serendipitous, improvised, open-ended, permissive, and including an element of risk into an introductory academic development programme, namely the Post Graduate Diploma in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (PGDLTHE). The outcome is one of enhanced opportunities for reflexivity and interdisciplinary dialogue.

Introduction

The growing number of Offices or Centres for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education around the world reflects a current concern with improving the quality of teaching in higher education (Forgie, Yonge & Luth, 2018; Lotti, Serbati, Doria, Picasso & Felisatti, 2022). One of their common aims is to promote professionalization of faculty through optimization of workplace learning initiated by means of formal and informal structures (Manuti, Pastore, Scardigno, Giancaspro & Morciano, 2015). The aim is to influence the culture of the organization in favour of more reflection on teaching practices and support towards student learning, especially for novice faculty who often have disciplinary knowledge but not necessarily an understanding of the nature of teaching and learning in higher education (Mladenovici, Ilie, Maricutoiu & Lancu, 2022). This reflective piece focuses on the informal conversations between an academic developer, who is in charge of designing and teaching a PGDLTHE, and a novice faculty member who teaches teachers of English Language. The study is located within the contextual space of a teacher education institution in Mauritius which introduced a formal academic development programme for novice staff during the first year of their practice. This reflective paper problematizes the nature of workplace learning in academia, particularly teacher education, while highlighting the possibilities offered by informal workplace conversations.

Problem Statement

While different organizations will adopt contextually relevant practices, the value of workplace conversation in influencing how effectively professionals draw from the experience is documented in the literature (Roxå, Mårtensson & Alveteg, 2010). Informal conversations about teaching, as an academic development strategy (Thomson & Barrie, 2021), have been indicated as having a “distinct role in supporting academics to learn how to manage and improve their teaching practice” (Thomson & Trigwell, 2018: 1). However, the nature of those backstage conversations, as indicated by Roxå and Mårtensson (2009), remains more sporadic, unstructured, and thus non-committal in essence, because they are often limited to enhancing understanding about teaching and learning rather than a change in practice (Thomson & Trigwell, 2018). However, when these conversations are supported by other structures, such as professional development opportunities put in place by the organization, the impact on the practices of faculty tends to be more pronounced and longer lasting. Literature on how informal conversations can potentially contribute to the local workplace climates of novice faculty and can challenge dominant cultures is sparse.

Our study aims at exploring this gap by reflecting on the experiences of two staff on a PGDLTHE offered to novice staff at a teacher education institution. By means of two narrative accounts positioned from the perspective of one novice faculty member who was registered in the programme and the academic developer who designed and serviced the first cohort, we engage with the possibilities for blending informal conversation spaces within a structured learning space.

Informal conversations and workplace learning

The value of informal conversation in providing opportunities for professional growth has been underexplored in the extant literature. Formal development opportunities for faculty take place by means of formal induction, completion of programmes of academic and professional development, individual consulting, and through the process of evaluating the quality of teaching and learning (Thomson, 2015). These opportunities are imbued with meaningful informal conversations, as an important “means of getting academics to open up and share their experiences” (Chadha, 2021: 373).

The impact of academic development is to “enhance educational practice” (Rijst, Dean & Laksov, 2022: 1) within the context of the faculty’s own departments, and their engagement with formal programmes (Thomson & Barrie, 2021). Knight (2006) argues that improving the quality of university teaching through academic development is challenging, partly because “professional formation is extensive, practice-based, and largely non-formal” (Knight, 2006: 34). This challenge is further intensified by the current policy landscapes occupied by higher education institutions. Within the neoliberal and managerial context of higher education, crucial conversations about the purposes of higher education and the implications for teaching, and ways to organise and lead higher education are marginalized, which is problematic for deliberative academic development (Fremstad, Bergh, Solbrekke & Fosslund, 2020).

There is thus a need for academic developers to disrupt the existing status quo rather than “training academics to perform better” (McKenna, 2012). This can happen by “questioning, challenging and critiquing taken-for-granted ways of doing things in higher education” (Quinn, 2012: 1). Using informal conversations between academic developers and novice faculty in formal professional development programmes disrupts uniformity in practice, as it challenges what it means to be an academic, both for the novice faculty member and the academic developer. In contesting neoliberalism in higher education, informal conversations may potentially offer possibilities to create

more engaging, democratic, and co-creative learning experiences in a formal development programme.

Gibbs (2013: 13) has encouraged developers to consider “what else they might do”. Using informal conversations between academic developers and novice faculty members within a structured academic development programme may offer insights into how academics cope with the competing expectations to produce research, “teach highly diverse student bodies, be technologically competent, and satisfy institutional and national measures of quality and accountability” (Deaker, Stein & Spiller, 2016: 300), while they engage with their professional development. This can help academic developers scaffold professional learning experiences that respond to the challenges and needs of the faculty.

Existing spaces for formal and informal conversations

Figure 1 illustrates existing dominant formats of conversation in the various professional activities in which novice faculty usually engage. As indicated, all of them provide formal and informal conversation opportunities but these rarely overlap as formal conversational spaces and are hierarchically structured and controlled, while informal conversation spaces are culturally structured and influenced (Roxå & Mårtesson, 2015). In higher education, these informal collegial conversations are shaped by ‘mutual respect, reciprocity, and the sharing of values and practices’ (Pleschová, Roxå, Thomson & Felten., 2021: 201) while also involving “risk and vulnerability” (Ibid.) in tackling the complexity of teaching. Yet, depending on the cultural organizational set up, the informal spaces can also be dominated by the same power relationship which characterizes the formal space, which could restrict opportunities for novice academics to overtly express their concerns and practices.

Participants in the PGDLTHE

Within the context of this study, four novice academics were registered on the formal academic programme and formed part of one cohort. They were from multiple disciplines, namely Pedagogy, English, Biology, and Psychology of Education. Three of them had some experience of teaching in a secondary school and one had counselling experience in a health facility. Because they were recruited at the same time, social bonds were formed quite early through the programmatic space of the PGDLTHE. Their shared interrogations and immediate concerns became the subject of informal conversations with both peers and tutor on the programme. These were recognized as

being connected to the issues, topics, and theoretical perspectives offered by the four modules of the programme. It was then agreed upon by the four novice staff and the tutor on the programme (academic developer) to adopt a more needs-driven approach.

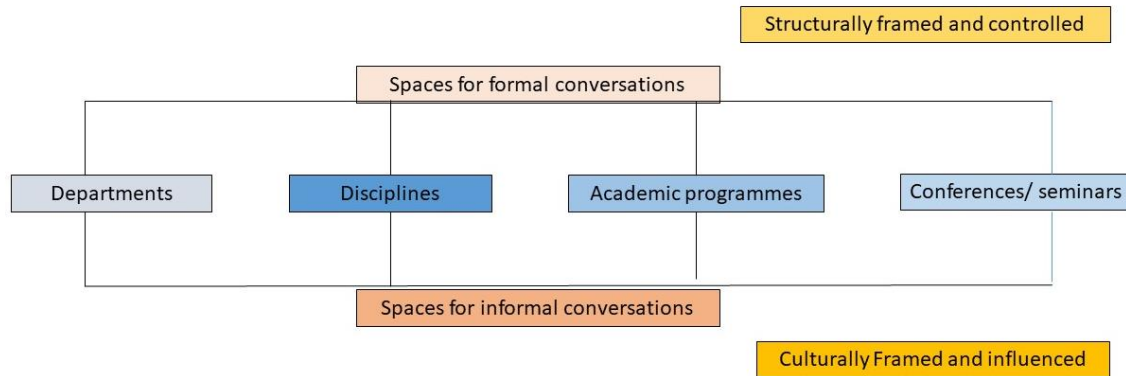


Figure 1. Professional activities and the nature of their conversational spaces (derived and adapted from Roxå & Mårtesson, 2015).

Pedagogical Approach of the PGDLTHE

The pedagogical repertoire used in the PGDLTHE programme was constructed with a view to integrating both formal and informal conversations spaces. It combined paired discussions, individual presentations, discussion of professional work, and activity-based learning, all driven by specific tasks around curriculum alignment and approaches to teaching, learning, and assessment. Classes, scheduled weekly, were needs driven to a large extent, with participants bringing current departmental assigned tasks which were work in progress or concerns and using these as an entry point into the wider theories and discourses in higher education.

The format was designed in the following three stages:

Stage One	Informal Conversations	Finger on the pulse moment to take stock of concerns, questions, and feelings	Articulating and making sense of the professional issue within a common space
Stage Two	Reflective stepping back	Locating the concern/issue within the bigger picture	Reframing / recoding the concern / issue in a higher education vocabulary using some of the ongoing readings
Stage Three	The formal academic conversation	Relating the concern / issue to the broader theoretical perspectives,	Enriching and complexifying the perspectives to understand what it means to teach in HE

The experience of this approach is documented from the perspective of one novice faculty, Ruba, and the academic developer, Sybille, based on their reflective memos written throughout the programme.

The experience of integrating informal conversation space within the structured space of an academic development programme

As a new entrant, Ruba (a novice academic) felt it was almost impossible to negotiate her emergent questions as a novice academic even in the informal conversation space of departments which are normally characterized by strong ties of affiliation and identity, as illustrated below:

Transitioning from being an English Language secondary school teacher, my sense of professional self occupied an in-between space where my teacher identity belonged neither to my old profession — nor to my present role as a teacher educator. This ‘loss of expertise’ caused a profound dis-ease which I could not express nor examine within my departmental space. In hindsight, I believe that the teacher identity schism deepened in the absence of a language and conversational space to articulate these concerns.

It was this sense of loss which she conveyed with peers and tutors during a session. The issue of multiple and even conflicting identities occurring in higher education set-ups were then thickened through the anecdotal additions, extensions, and contestations by peers. The manifestations of this anxiety on concrete actions were analysed as they unfolded in day-to-day practice. Mitigating this anxiety through expertise building, research, and the art of noticing certain patterns in personal behaviour or that of significant others were the decisive action points to enact and reflect upon in this paper. Ruba examined the theoretical basis of the beliefs she held and assumptions she made while talking about their work and the actions in which they engage. She questioned institutional practices and saw in this an opportunity for going back to her department with professional and academic questions. In the process she had to learn to tread carefully within environments which may not always demonstrate friendly acceptance of new ideas. As Ruba reflects:

For early-career teacher educators who have not yet established such an informal social network, the opportunity for engaging in such critical teacher conversations in an informal manner within the formal space of an academic development programme, such as the PGDLT was crucial for initiating me with regularity and consistency into habits of reflection.

The characteristics of informal conversation were formally brought into the programme as sessions were led collaboratively where the agenda was sometimes decided by participants as it would occur in a peer group conversation about a shared topic of interest. This meant that the tutor had to always find a way to convert the casual observation or comment on a professional issue being

currently experienced into a matter which could offer opportunities for more formal exploration using an identified theoretical body of knowledge. It produced the double advantage of securing the desire for participants to talk about what they noticed in formal conversations and knowing that the site of their practice is rich enough for academic exploration and personal knowledge generation. Blending these informal conversations into the more structured format of a formal academic development course was, however, not without its caveats, as Sybille explains:

I was however worried as to how the transition would be made when the time came for me to evaluate their work because our interactions were such that it could have led to a complete blurring of my formal role. But I was helped I think by the nature of the assignment and the assessment criteria which were open ended. They even case studied their own assignment for constructive alignment and offered me suggestions as a tutor. For me this was the sign that the integration of formal and informal conversation could be envisaged!

The richness of the disciplinary background was often used to allow world views and beliefs to conflict making horizontal conversations (understood as conversations which are not dominated by a particular participant because of superiority of knowledge or position and thus remained informal) the prevalent form of conversation and reinforced their informal nature.

Ruba further explains how these inter-disciplinary conversations fed forward into her own reflexive practices:

I had to complete the tasks but I could choose my focus, my orientation and I was free to bring to the table what I thought was important. I could choose my language. More so, interdisciplinary understanding of effective teaching and learning might not have been possible by interacting within one discipline. Perhaps it was easier as we had limited lived experience within our disciplinary departments, we readily gravitated towards the opportunity of interdisciplinary conversational space.

An unexpected outcome of the project was the emergence of intergenerational conversations which was reflected in the narratives of both faculties. Since formal structures experience inherent power dynamics which constrain conversations between new and senior faculty, the integration of informal learning spaces meant negotiating new patterns of relationships based on mutuality of concerns, trust, and a sharing of power. These are also the pre-conditions under which collective reflexivity is encouraged and thrive, as Sybille indicates:

This experience will need to be deconstructed further to examine how senior academics can learn from new entrants. What are they seeing which we have become blind to In formal structured space these questions are controversial but taken to an informal space where more open critique and contestations are possible. In the instance of those informal conversations they told me things which I needed to hear, and which would never have come from my contemporaries.

Foregrounding backstage conversations in the formal space of an academic development programme

We indicate the value of exploring further the perspective of Roxå and Mårtesson (2009). Figure 2 illustrates how a formal learning space can include pockets of informal conversations as a legitimate and acknowledged part of the curriculum. We argue that while existing literature details how both can be mutually reinforcing as two separate ways of communicating, there is little so far in the way of demonstrating the possibilities for conjoint actions produced through blending of informal conversation within a formal learning space. The effect on the two faculties has been framed as disruption of entry values, beliefs, and practices about teaching of both novice and more seasoned faculty members by expanding repertoires of how academics talk, represent their enactments of practice, and confront these with the perspectives of other academics coming from different worldviews, disciplinary traditions, experiences and positions. Integrating informal conversations was a risk because it created possibilities for horizontal dialogue and thus two-way disruption for both the novice academic and the academic developer. At the same time, however, it augmented capacities for examining taken-for-granted perspectives.

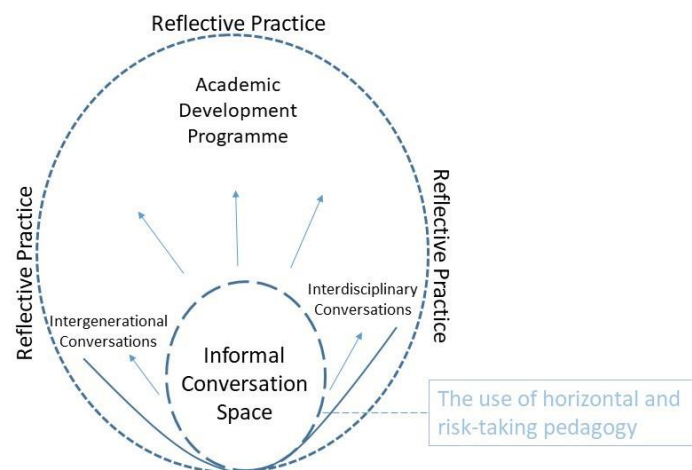


Figure 2: Integrating informal conversation space within formal academic programme to experience interdisciplinary and intergenerational conversations for reflective practice.

Implications and conclusions

Development programmes for novice academics would gain much from a flexible approach encouraged through the integration of informal conversational and formal spaces in terms of

relevance and currency to their needs. A pedagogy of conversation has offered increased opportunities for the reciprocal learning which occurs across generations of academics and became for Ruba and Sybille a route for self-initiated professional growth enhancing both collective and individual reflective ability.

References

- Bamber, V. & Stefani, L. 2016. Taking up the challenge of evidencing value in educational development: From theory to practice. *International Journal for Academic Development*. 21(3): 242–254. DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2015.1100112
- Chadha, D. 2021. Over a nice, hot cup of tea! Reflecting on the conditions for meaningful, informal conversations between academic developers and novice academics. *International Journal of Academic Development*. 26(3):373-377. DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2021.1932512
- Deaker, L. Stein, S. J. & Spiller, D. 2016. You can't teach me: Exploring academic resistance to teaching development. *International Journal of Academic Development*. 21(4): 299-311. DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2015.1129967
- Forgie, S. E., Yonge, O. & Luth, R. 2018. Centres for teaching and learning across Canada: What's going on? *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*. 9 (1). DOI: 10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2018.1.9
- Fremstad, E., Bergh, A., Solbrekke, T. D. & Fosslund, T. 2020. Deliberative academic development: The potential and challenge of agency. *International Journal of Academic Development*. 25(2): 107-120. DOI:10.1080/1360144X.2019.1631169
- Gibbs, G. 2013. Reflections on the changing nature of educational development. *International Journal of Academic Development*. 18(1): 4-14. DOI:10.1080/1360144X.2013.751691
- Gibbs, G. & Coffey, M. 2004. The impact of training of university teachers on their teaching skills, their approach to teaching and the approach to learning of their students. *Active Learning in Higher Education*. 5(1): 87–100. DOI: 10.1177/1469787404040463
- Knight, P. 2006. Quality enhancement and educational professional development. *Quality in Higher Education*. 12(1): 29–40. DOI: 10.1080/13538320600685123
- Lotti, A., Serbati, A., Doria, B., Picasso, P. & Felisatti, E. 2022. Teaching and Learning Centre: Analysis of key elements. *European Journal of Research on Education and Teaching*. 20 (2). DOI: [10.7346/-fei-XX-02-22_06](https://doi.org/10.7346/-fei-XX-02-22_06)
- Manuti, A., Pastore, S., Scardigno, A., Giancaspro, M. & Morciano, D. 2015. Formal and informal learning in the workplace: A research review. *International Journal of Training and Development*. 19 (1):1-17. DOI: 10.1111/ijtd.12044
- McKenna, S. 2012. Interrogating the academic project. In Quinn, L. (ed.). *Reimagining Academic Staff Development: Spaces for Disruption*. Stellenbosch: Sun Media.

Mladenovici, V., Ilie, M.D., Maricuțoiu, L.P. & Lancu, D.E. 2022. Approaches to teaching in higher education: The perspective of network analysis using the revised approaches to teaching inventory. *Higher Education*. 84: 255–277. DOI: 10.1007/s10734-021-00766-9

Pleschová, G., Roxå, T., Thomson, K. E. & Felten, P. 2021. Conversations that make meaningful change in teaching, teachers, and academic development. *International Journal of Academic Development*. 26(3): 201-209. DOI:10.1080/1360144X.2021.1958446

Quinn, L. (ed.). 2012. *Reimagining Academic Staff Development: Spaces for Disruption*. Stellenbosch: Sun Media.

Rijst, R. V. D., Dean, B. & Laksov, K. B. 2022. Revisiting the impact of academic development: Scholarship and practice. *International Journal of Academic Development*. 27(1): 1-3. DOI 10.1080/1360144X.2022.2033425

Roxå, T. & Mårtensson, K. 2009. Significant conversations and significant networks – exploring the backstage of the teaching arena. *Studies in Higher Education*. 34(5): 547-559. DOI: 10.1080/03075070802597200

Roxå, T. & Mårtensson, K. 2015. Microcultures and informal learning: A heuristic guiding analysis of conditions for informal learning in local higher education workplaces. *International Journal of Academic Development*. 20(2): 193-205. DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2015.1029929

Roxå, T., Mårtensson, K. & Alveteg, M. 2010. Understanding and influencing teaching and learning cultures at university: A network approach. *Higher Education*. 62(1): 99-111. DOI: 10.1007/s10734-010-9368-9

Thomson, K. E. 2015. Informal conversations about teaching and their relationship to a formal development program: Learning opportunities for novice and mid-career academics. *International Journal of Academic Development*. 20 (2): 137-149. DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2015.1028066

Thomson, K. E. & Barrie, S. 2021. Conversations as a source of professional learning: Exploring the dynamics of camaraderie and common ground amongst university teachers. *International Journal of Academic Development*. 26(3): 320-334. DOI: 10.1080/1360144X.2021.1944160

Thomson, K. E. & Trigwell, K. R. 2018. The role of informal conversations in developing university teaching. *Studies in Higher Education*. 43(9): 1536-1547. DOI: 10.1080/03075079.2016.1265498

Trigwell, K., Caballero-Rodriguez, K. & Han, F. 2012. Assessing the impact of a university teaching development programme. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. 37(4): 499–511. DOI:10.1080/02602938.2010.547929



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>