Pedagogical conversations generated by attending a learning and teaching conference

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Abstract

This paper explores pedagogical conversations that academics instigate after attending a pedagogical conference with individuals they find significant for their teaching. The study uses a sample of 16 graduates from a teaching development programme and their conversations about the ideas that stemmed from participating in what was for many of them their first conference on university teaching and learning. The paper seeks to explore whether the attendance of a teaching and learning conference encourages pedagogical conversations, and more specifically conversations that foster change in pedagogical thinking or practice. If there is evidence of such conversations, we are interested in uncovering how teachers make use of conversing about what they learnt, in other words, what kind of change pedagogical conversations stimulate. Finally, we want to learn if this change is in any way facilitated by five conditions that literature (Pleschová et al, 2021) identified as catalysts of effective conversations about teaching and learning.

Literature review

Previous studies that explored outcomes from teaching development programmes found these programmes effective when they scaffolded integration of knowledge learnt from the programme into graduate thinking and practice (Pleschová and McAlpine, 2016). Programmes used different tools to support this transfer, including, but not limited to, mentoring/coaching (Kamvounias, McGrath-Champ and Yip, 2008), reflective exercises (Karm, 2010), additional training (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne and Nevgi, 2008), scholarship of teaching and learning (Ginns, Kitay and Prosser, 2010) and peer observations of teaching. This study reports on results from a programme that sought to support graduates' learning post-programme through facilitating their attendance at a pedagogical conference and encouraging conference-related conversations. A body of research that takes a socio-cultural perspective on teaching and learning in higher education (see, for example, Mårtensson, Roxå and Olsson, 2011; Trowler, 2008) posits that teachers make sense of the world around them through interaction with other individuals, rather in isolation from others. Those exchanges include formulation of ideas, seeking feedback from others and possibly re-thinking of earlier understandings following this feedback. Talking to others is, for an academic teacher, a way of externalizing oneself (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) as caring about teaching and student learning and thereby stabilizing a nascent conception of learning-centred teaching (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). Such processes may be even more important as the participants return to institutional contexts where more teaching-centred teaching and learning regimes rule (Trowler, 2019). From an individual and cognitive approach to change (Kezar, 2018) this would be even more significant.

Academic teachers discuss teaching and student learning within small networks of people (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009). Hofman and Dijkstra (2010: 1031) found teacher networks that focus on (self-) reflection, stimulation of enthusiasm, construction of a community among participating individuals and creation of opportunities for application of new materials/methods in the classroom provided "the most promising ways for professional development and job motivation". Exploring teachers' networks, albeit at a different level (primary schools), Moolenaar, Sleegers and Dalywell (2012) uncovered that connected teacher networks were associated with strong teacher collective efficacy, which in turn boosted student achievement. Because pedagogical conferences attract higher education professionals who consider teaching an important and impactful part of their responsibilities, they offer an excellent occasion to build and strengthen such networks.

When higher education teachers converse about teaching, they not only report voicing their teaching and learning-related feelings and reassuring themselves about their own teaching practice but additionally use these conversations to manage their teaching context, improve their own teaching and student learning and transform their teaching-related views and practice (Thomson and Trigwell, 2018). Change of teaching practice following discussions with peer teachers also emerged from research conducted by Warfvinge, Roxå and Löfgreen (2018) who concluded that teaching development is facilitated by rich social interactions informed by literature and student feedback.

Past research has investigated many different aspects of pedagogical conversations of teaching faculty members, including, for example, their topics, pre-conditions, number of conversation partners and the nature of relationships between them (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009; Pataraia et al, 2014; Van Waes et al, 2015; Poole, Iqbal and Verwoord, 2019; Simon and Pleschová, 2021). Interestingly, the literature says very little on what teachers gain from pedagogical conferences, even if participation in the academic conferences is at the heart of academic scholarship. This paucity of research also extends to exploration of what conference participants learn through talking to other people even if it is very plausible that during and especially upon return from such an event – when attendees have had more time to reflect – they talk about their experience.

Førland and Anderson (2021) investigated what ten participants of a teaching development course learnt when attending a pedagogical conference. They reported participants experiencing the conference as an added value to the course, praising their interaction with "a very nice community" free from big egos that are sometimes present at disciplinary conferences. All informants shared intentions to put to use knowledge and experience gained from the conference in their future teaching.

Popovic (in Popovic and Baume, 2016) highlights the role of conferences on higher education teaching, learning and development as "opportunities to network and learn," from whence she always returns "energised and brim-full of ideas". She shares her own experience from how attendance at one such conference led her to participate in another conference and then to get an academic job at her current institution, which, as she says "literally changed my life!" According to Popovic and Baume (2016), teachers typically value sharing of thoughts that help them to dispel feelings of isolation and prompt ideas for innovation and change, classifying this as one of the key reasons for attending a pedagogical conference. For Brown and Wareing (2016), participation in teaching, learning and teaching development conferences is an essential component of their professional development.

Pleschova et al. (2021) summarised the five catalysing factors for pedagogical conversations to have visible effects on higher education teachers' pedagogical thinking and practice. These included cross-disciplinary participation in conversations, trustful relationships, conducive spaces, co-construction practices and caring attitudes. In environments where one or more of these conditions were present, studies reported the occurrence of fruitful pedagogical conversations which had tangible connections with improved teaching and student learning.

Building upon these findings from literature, the present study, as demonstrated below, was deliberately designed to bring new insights to this area of professional practice through the exploration of conference-stimulated pedagogical conversations, a topic for which empirical evidence has thus far been scant (for an exception, see Førland and Andersson, 2021). We found that attending a pedagogical conference can be an important way for graduates from a teaching development programme to reinforce what they gained from the programme, broaden their teaching and learning-related knowledge, and serve as an external validation of what participants learnt on the programme. Moreover, pedagogical conferences stimulated teachers to think of new innovative practices they could trial, including through partnerships with colleagues at other institutions, which encouraged teachers to look more outwardly and move away from routine practices in their home institution.

Programme description

Effective teaching for internationalisation and *Innovative teaching that inspires good learning* are two teaching development programmes offered by a research university in the European Union. The programmes span a period of two years and one year respectively and consist of a series of half-day bi-weekly workshops in the first semester and a follow-up semester-long teaching practicum. Before, during and after the practicum, programme participants complete a series of assignments such as a design of a teaching innovation, plans for innovated class sessions, teaching observation connected with post observation discussion and a scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) study into the outcomes of the innovation. Both programmes aim to help teachers become student-centred and reflective in their teaching. The programmes have been accredited by the local provider (a higher education institution) and the UK Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) that awards the graduates an internationally recognised certificate. More details about the programmes together with the reports on outcomes from participant innovations are presented in Pleschová and Simon (2021).

The principles of change document (Quinn Patton 2018) for both programmes refers to the deliberate creation of conditions for programme participants that foster conversations about teaching and learning as these were found conducive to change in teaching-related thinking and practice (Pleschová et al. 2021). The programme team considers encouragement of such conversations very important because there is a lack of tradition in the region to talk about higher education learning and teaching, and without specific incentives very little discussion of this nature would take place. In general, these teachers do not attend pedagogical conferences but only participate in disciplinary academic conferences.

In order to scaffold participant learning from the teaching development programme, the programme team decided to encourage teachers to attend a pedagogical conference and also facilitated their conference participation. This included raising teachers' awareness about such conferences, sharing calls for paper proposals for those that were most feasible for teachers to attend (bearing in mind the cost of attending or disciplinary focus) and fundraising to help participants cover the conference-related costs. In a number of cases, the team had to take administrative measures to ensure the costs were reimbursed from projects run by participant institutions, or to negotiate with institutional leaders in charge of those projects to convince them of the added value to the institution and the merit of sending a good number of teachers to the conference itself.

To encourage active conference participation from all, support for the participants also took the form of guiding them to write a solid conference proposal, commenting on draft versions and providing technical guidance for how to submit their abstract. The team repeatedly reached out to course graduates who were hesitant about going to a conference which was different from those they had previously attended or who claimed to be too busy with their research, administrative and other responsibilities. Finally, the team often provided considerable help with administrative issues related to conference participation. Many programme graduates were early career academics and they had no experience with the paperwork involved in overseas travel, compounded by the two-year COVID-19 pandemic period, which had prevented them from travelling outside their institution.

The conferences recommended to the programme graduates included the following four:

- The European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) 2021 plenary conference and especially its teaching-related roundtable and panels (an online event, attended by 2 programme graduates)
- ICOLLE 2021 conference (Brno, Czechia, attended by 3 graduates)

- ENLIGHT[1] 2021 Teaching and learning conference (Ghent, Belgium, attended by 7 graduates)
- and ENLIGHT 2022 Teaching and learning conference (Gőttingen, Germany, attended by 10 graduates).

One programme graduate participated in three of these conferences and three individuals attended two conferences, hence altogether 16 individuals were supported. Out of these, ten were PhD students, five were PhD holders with several years' teaching experience and one was a senior academic with more than twenty years of teaching experience. Regarding their discipline, the majority came from humanities and social science disciplines, including, for example, journalism, law, philosophy, psychology, sociology and linguistics. One graduate was from medicine.

Prior to attending the conference, the programme team communicated three requests to these individuals. First, they were asked to attend at least one further conference session beyond the one in which they delivered their contribution and to pay attention to any ideas on higher education learning and teaching that related to what they learned in the teaching development programme. Second, after the conference was over, they were to talk about the idea(s) to their significant other, i.e. a person they found significant for their own teaching (Warfvinge, Roxå and Löfgreen, 2018; Simon and Pleschová, 2021). This might be a colleague, family member, partner or friend provided this was a person they trusted. Third, we primed them to a follow up interview related to that conversation.

Research methods

Data analysed for this research include individual interviews conducted with teaching development programme graduates. This implies that the research subjects were individuals already interested in teaching who saw a value in investing in the enhancement of their own teaching practice. These interviews were conducted by a member of the programme team: for the first 12 interviews, this was the lead author of this study, for the 10 remaining interviews, this was another team member. The interview protocol included ten questions that asked about the conversation partner, where the conversation happened, ideas from the conference that the programme graduate discussed and whether these confirmed or contradicted what they had learnt in the course. Programme graduates were also asked if attending the conference had challenged some of their assumptions concerning learning and teaching, if it had changed how they now thought about teaching and learning and whether they planned to change their teaching based on what they had learnt at the conference. Interviews were conducted in most cases several days after graduates' return from the conference, so that the conference and their post-conference conversation were still fresh in their minds.

All the programme graduates who had attended a pedagogical conference agreed to be interviewed. The interviews took about 15-20 minutes each. The language of interview was English as the interviewees spoke English fluently: one of the programmes was conducted in English language and the conferences were held in English. One participant preferred to be interviewed in her native language, which was respected. Recording was made via MS Teams, which created an automatic transcript. The interview held in a language different than English was transcribed by a research assistant. Transcripts were later checked and amended where appropriate by a member of the research team.

Analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted in two stages. Initially, the programme lead (and the first author of this study) read and coded all transcripts to identify patterns across the dataset of the first 15 interviews using the thematic analysis method (Braun and Clarke, 2006). About one year later, in a period free from the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, ten more interviews were collected. Two

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[1] ENLIGHT is a consortium of ten higher education institutions from different parts of Europe, which won a European universities' grant from the European Commission and have enhancement of teaching and learning among their priorities.

researchers who were not among the programme team members undertook thematic analysis of these ten new interview transcripts (Braun and Clarke, ibid.) and generated a list of key themes connected to three research questions. The researchers coded the first four transcripts together to identify the themes and then separately completed the analysis (three transcripts each).

Findings and discussion

Analysis of data collected in the first stage revealed that conversations were still influenced by the last wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in that they typically occurred outside the usual workplace such as at home (6), in the car (1) or online (4). Constraints occasioned by the pandemic also presumably resulted in the conversation partner being a person to whom programme graduates had easiest access, such as a life partner (6) or fellow PhD student (3) and in almost all cases this was a person with the same, or cognate, disciplinary background (14). All research subjects claimed that their conference related experience and the issues they discussed with their conversation partner were in alignment with what they had learnt in the programme. Their conversations addressed a wide variety of topics and their overview is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. A range of conversation topics reported by programme graduates after attending a pedagogical conference

Topic	Number of graduates that referred to that topic
introducing new teaching and assessment methods	5
fostering learning communities among students and teachers	2
improving learning experience for international students	1
addressing barriers that discourage junior scholars from experimenting with novel learning techniques	1
ways of promoting elective courses so that more students decide to enrol them	1
making the best of online education	1
means of bringing teaching development opportunities for colleague teachers	1

Categorisation of the responses revealed that the conference was believed to have confirmed knowledge from the programme (4), inspired different ways of thinking about teaching or teaching differently (3) and reinforced previous knowledge (2), in particular the conviction of the effectiveness of active learning methods and the importance of the programme for graduates' learning.

In the second stage, we analysed ten interviews conducted after the graduates from *Innovative teaching that inspires good learning* programme attended the ENLIGHT 2022 teaching and learning conference. In these interviews, one person reported conversing with multiple individuals; hence the number of conversation partners (11) exceeds the number of research subjects (10). As for the variety of people programme graduates conversed with, a spouse featured as a conversation partner in two cases (for both these research subjects, their partners were also professionals working in education), two people chose a family member and a friend, respectively, one approached a former classmate and six people talked to a colleague from their department or faculty. In six cases, conversation partners were from the same discipline and in four from a cognate discipline. Conversations typically occurred in informal places, such as a cafeteria, home and on the train; although three conversations happened in the office, one of these continued in an informal space over lunch.

In line with findings from the conversations of attendees from the past conferences summarised above, programme graduates again reported discussing a variety of topics. These included adopting strategies to support inclusion, addressing the tension between research versus teaching capacity, finding ways to inspire more senior colleagues to attend a teaching and learning conference and stark differences in teaching practices between institutions represented at the conference. Many participants referred to new approaches, which they had found important during the conference, as their conversation topic. These included teaching innovations like gamification of learning, peer feedback for student learning and new assessment practices.

Nevertheless, some conversation topics came out repeatedly, such as diversity and inclusion and self-reflection on teachers' own role when compared with institutional colleagues and those teaching elsewhere, particularly after conference participants had been exposed to how teaching is conducted in a different context (discipline, institution, or region). Teachers repeatedly stated that after hearing about other perspectives they could not simply continue teaching in the same way as was prevalent in their own institution. This exposure to other ways of teaching practice was found to be very important.

As for the perceived influence on teaching-related thinking, two programme graduates said the conference only confirmed the knowledge they had gained from the programme: all the others claimed that the conference had broadened their horizons in relation to higher education (HE) teaching and learning. They were able to give concrete examples of this, such as being prompted to seek partners from other universities to co-design and deliver courses, better understanding of the concepts introduced during the programme, gaining confidence in using innovative teaching methods, receiving further inspiration for how to approach class planning and overcoming initial scepticism towards one teaching method (gamification). Overall, conference attendance seems to have gone further than a simple external validation of what participants learnt on the programme. It has also made them more confident as teachers, and prompted moving from base level to the next level of thinking about university teaching and learning. Their evident gain was in reflecting and questioning where they fit into these new approaches and what their role in these approaches was. The conference challenged the programme graduates to think about themselves not just individuals but where they fit into the wider HE context. For some of them, it uncovered contradictions between teaching approaches in hard sciences and soft disciplines and raised awareness of different practices in different disciplines.

When the programme graduates talked about the ways in which the conference had generated inspiration to change, this related to two broader areas. Some thought of changing their own teaching and learning practice in terms of being more inclusive, redesigning classes to rely more on peer learning, incorporating elements from challenge-based education, improving opportunities for getting and responding to student feedback and introducing less serious learning activities, for example gamification, to increase student engagement. Others deliberated about changing their career trajectory so as to seek grants to support teaching and learning, or announced their intention to start researching learning after they had heard this was a discipline in its own right. All in all, conference attendance has enabled teachers to emerge from their own environment, gaining ideas for partnership with others, specifically with teachers from other disciplines, and fostering a desire for meaningful interaction and collaborative projects with them.

Finally, in relationship to the five conditions earlier reported as supportive of productive pedagogical conversations of academic teachers (Pleschová at al., 2021), we found particular alignment with two of them in this study: trustful relationships and conducive spaces. As for the relationships based on trust, all programme graduates could name at least one trusted person with whom they conversed about teaching-related gains from the pedagogical conference. It appeared that such conversations were a very natural occurrence for these individuals, who were already enthusiastic about teaching and learning, which is why they had voluntarily applied for their teaching development programme. As for the conducive spaces, some spaces repeatedly came out as favourable for pedagogical conversations due to their non-threatening and more informal surroundings. These included cafeterias, restaurants,

travelling by car/train on the way to or from the institution, and the participants' own homes. This confirms what Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) found about spaces that academic teachers choose for pedagogical conversations: these are typically backstage to allow academics to talk about difficult aspects of their own and others' practice, about potential failures, thereby allowing them to test out various ideas with a person they trust. We assume these informal settings support conversation to occur more freely, where the use of everyday vocabulary enabled the focus to be on the meaning of the discourse, rather than being required to express oneself in a more academic register which might have hindered the flow and hence the import of the discussion.

Three factors – cross-disciplinary participation in conversations, co-construction practices and caring attitudes – did not come out from our data. This may be due to institutional factors where the context does not promote pedagogical conversations, especially those that are cross-disciplinary, or where engaging students in co-creation practices such as design, delivery and enhancement of courses is not commonplace. This points also to the lack of institutional mechanisms to support such cross-disciplinary conversations and engagement of students as valid partners in teaching. Finally, the absence of caring attitudes was surprising and may be connected to findings from another project we implemented, the BELONG project, where teaching staff members and students reported a relatively low sense of belonging to the institution (Smitková et al, 2023).

Conclusions

This study explored pedagogical conversations that graduates from a teaching development programme had with their colleagues, friends and family members following attendance at a teaching and learning conference, focusing on what teachers described as a learning gain from this experience. The study found that pedagogical conferences had inspired graduates from teaching development programmes to talk about a variety of issues with their conversation partners. Most frequent topics were teaching practices that support inclusion and self-reflection on the teachers' own role when contemplating and/or critiquing typical teaching practices at their home institution and examining the different ways in which students learn in other institutions and contexts. Uncovering of these other ways of teaching practice after the teachers had already been exposed to different ways of teaching during their teaching development programme further stimulated them to think about teaching and approach teaching in innovative ways, i.e. ways that were significantly different from the mainstream approach they had been used to in their own department or institution.

The study moreover confirmed earlier findings that when engaging in pedagogical conversations academic teachers seek out people whom they trust and prefer locations beyond formal spaces available at their institution. Contrary to past reports, there was no alignment with earlier findings about the value of conversations with partners outside of teachers' academic field, the value of conversations with student partners and the importance of care in these talks about teaching and student learning.

To support such future professional development, we would recommend formal institutional support for teachers to attend conferences on teaching and learning and the introduction of further incentives for them and their colleagues to benefit from such academic events, for example by convening more informal events held locally, where teachers from different disciplines can hear and discuss examples of innovative and effective teaching practices.

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Appendix: interview protocol

1. So you have now talked to someone who is significant for your teaching after the conference. Can you briefly say who this person was? (You do not need to name him/her)
2. Was this partner from your discipline?
3. Do you think your conversation partner was a person you could trust?
4. Where did such a conversation occur (space)?
5. Can you briefly explain what idea on HE learning and teaching did you talk about?
6. Has this idea confirmed what you heard on the course (in what aspects?)
7. Has this idea contradicted what you heard on the course (in what aspects)
8. Did you talk about anything that had surprised you during the conference? Made you angry? Raised your interest? Made you disagree?
9. Do you think that attending the conference challenged some of your assumptions concerning learning and teaching? If yes, which assumptions? Can you say you now think differently about teaching and learning? If yes, in what aspects?
10. Would you like to change anything in your teaching practice following what you learnt during the conference?