

Professional learning communities generate the continuous learning culture needed by schools in the 21st century. And they can make a real difference. Where they persistently focus on improving learning and teaching, they improve teachers' practice and students' learning. Professional learning communities are groups of teachers or school leaders, or even whole schools or groups of schools – also known as learning networks or networked learning communities.

They operate within and across boundaries. They are driven by finding and learning new and better ways to help them enhance learning opportunities and outcomes for all students.<sup>1</sup> They approach this through mutually supportive activity, collaborative enquiry and learning experiences. In essence, they are voracious social learners.

I have become interested in learning conversations through studying and supporting the development

# Stimulating Learning Conversations

How do educators make meaning together to gain insights into their practice and bring about change? **Louise Stoll** provides a comprehensive guide to “learning conversations” – the conditions needed to support them and how they can transform professional development.



of professional learning communities and learning networks, and following related interests in designing and evaluating leadership learning, and finding ways to help educators and policy makers learn from and make use of research findings. All of my work has focused on how people learn and change when they are together. So social learning comes into play, and one of the key means you have to communicate with each other is through conversation. In this article, I unpack learning conversations. But before I describe what I mean by learning conversations, I will look at why social learning is important.

### Why social learning?

Intelligence isn't just an individual concept. Thinking interdependently, being able to work and learn well with other people and learning from and with others is a habit of an intelligent mind (Lucas and Claxton, 2010). Learning with and from others isn't just enjoyable; it's a natural way to learn. Most people don't need persuading that connecting is central to their lives. Social networking is now a norm for many of us. An increasing number of readers of this article will have 'grown up digital' (Tapscott, 2009); in other words, "digital technology is no more intimidating than a VCR or toaster". The Net Generation (Net Geners) are natural collaborators, staying in touch on smartphones wherever they are. As employees, Don Tapscott and colleagues' research found, Net Geners want to work hand-in-hand with colleagues to create better goods and services, design products, influence decisions and improve work processes. However, although social-networking sites help people to connect, they don't produce collective intelligence

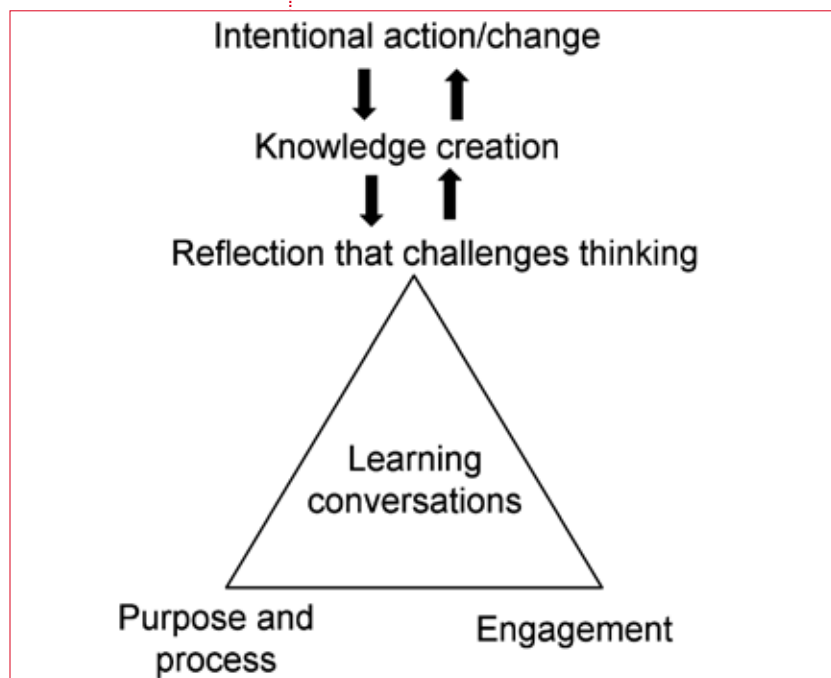
(Leadbeater, 2008). So, how can the energy of people's natural desire to collaborate best be harnessed into learning power – collaborating with others, learning with and from them, to achieve both personal and collective goals?

Many avenues are available to choose to suit different purposes; for example, peer coaching, action learning sets, collaborative forms of enquiry, reading groups, online communities, going on learning walks and reviews in each others' schools, to name a few. Conversation is critical to all of these – it's the means by which connections are made in these activities.

### Learning conversations

When I refer to learning conversations, I am thinking of them as the way that educators make meaning together and jointly come up with new insights and knowledge that lead to intentional change to enhance their practice and student learning. Exploring new ideas and evidence, participants offer diverse perspectives, challenge each other in respectful ways, and are open to being honest and pushing themselves to reflect deeply in ways that challenge their thinking.

The following are features I consider characteristic of high quality learning conversations between adults.



### ■■■ Purpose and process

**Focus on evidence and/or ideas** – Learning conversations are focused. The specific focus may reflect one of two important perspectives. The first is informed by evidence: the conversation's focus arises out of evidence from practice or about strong practice. For example, discussing research on learner engagement or examining evidence and thinking what it means in a particular context. The second reflects ideas about innovation and transformation where, for example, the conversation explores creative ways to engage learners and extend learning. Some conversations weave these two perspectives together. Both require all those participating in the conversation to be committed to the focus.

**Experience and external knowledge/theory** – Access to outside expertise deepens learning conversations. Syntheses of evidence on professional learning that makes a difference to teachers' practice and students' learning emphasise the importance of involving external expertise (Cordingley et al, 2008). Whether delivered personally, through writing, or via other media, independent ideas are injected to stimulate reflection, challenge the status quo and extend thinking. Such ideas can help promote greater depth in conversations. Combining people's own, and often tacit, knowledge with outside knowledge stimulates valuable new knowledge and helps groups come up with innovative solutions to problems.

**Protocols and tools** – Learning conversations can often be framed more clearly when supported by frameworks and guidelines that help participants structure their dialogue and interrogate evidence or ideas. The idea of protocols is based on Vygotskian thinking that the knowledge we possess is inextricably bound up with our tools, resources and collaborators. Such protocols can be used to help leaders create and develop professional learning communities by engaging in conversations around learning and teaching, and exploring together *what* they are learning that is most critical to success. Researchers can help by designing research-based protocols and tools aiming to stimulate learning conversations that lead to deep learning and production

of innovative ideas that help support development of people's practice (Stoll and Timperley, 2010; Stoll et al, 2006). It's important, though, to ensure that protocol-based conversations don't become formulaic in which the process takes precedence over the substance.

**Facilitation** – Facilitation isn't the same as external expertise. It can come from inside or outside the group, but it's needed to elicit and support intellectual exchange, as well as maintaining open dialogue (Senge, 1990) and, sometimes, injecting new energy into the conversation. Skilful facilitation can often lead to a productive balance of comfort and challenge.

### ■■■ Participant engagement

**Enquiry-mindedness** – Participants in learning conversations engage with an enquiry habit of mind (Earl and Katz, 2006). A habit of mind has been described as "a characteristic of what intelligent people do when they are confronted with problems, the resolutions of which are not immediately apparent" (Costa and Kallick, 2000). In this case, participants enter the conversation with a spirit of curiosity; a 'need to know' even when what they find out may not fit with their existing beliefs. They are proactive about seeking out new evidence and ideas, and open to being challenged.

**Respectful challenge** – Trusting and mutually respectful relationships are the bedrock of successful professional learning communities. David Bohm (1985), the physicist, argues that discussion avoids 'undiscussables' lying below the surface that block true and honest communication. Dialogue, by contrast, is more open, going beyond any individual's understanding, encouraging members of a team to suspend assumptions so they can genuinely 'think together'. Being respectful means listening attentively to others, a core feature of coaching relationships. Building positive relationship is an essential starting point for any substantive and critical exchange to take place. I use the word 'critical' in the way it is used when talking about critical friendship. Here, the critical friend has your interests at heart but will challenge you. And that's what happens in learning conversations – the quality of the relationship or what's



known as the sociability factor in online communities is important but so is challenge – and educators aren't very used to 'pushing' each other on their ideas and practices: they're much more used to the comfort of the 'land of nice' (City et al, 2010).

**Risk taking** – It may seem strange to suggest that learning conversations involve risk taking, but challenging others is not something we find easy to do, and being open to and even intentional about changing our practice (another feature of learning conversations) can be quite risky, taking us out of our comfort zone. People's creativity is stimulated by responsible risk taking, even though when they find this hard to do (Stoll and Timperley, 2009). Learning conversations can also help people think through 'what this will mean for me, for my students and my practice'.

### ■■■ Conversation that leads to change

**Reflection that challenges thinking** – Reflection is

central to making meaning. Social constructivist theory proposes that learners, drawing on their prior knowledge and experience, make meaning of new information or problems through talk – sharing, challenging, negotiating and justifying ideas. Learning occurs in that dissonance – the uncomfortable space where we are faced with knowledge or ideas that just don't fit with our experience of the way the world works. So, as people engage in conversations about what evidence means, they discover that ideas that they believe to be true don't hold up when under scrutiny and this recognition is used as an opportunity to rethink what they know and do (Earl and Timperley, 2008).

**Knowledge creation** – A key outcome of learning conversations is knowledge creation. This draws from organisational learning theory. The argument goes that talk between colleagues helps transform tacit knowledge (what we know but don't articulate) into explicit knowledge and the social process involved helps create

## Stimulating Learning Conversations ■■■■

new shared knowledge; learning as creating something new (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). So, conversations which make presuppositions, ideas, beliefs and feelings explicit and available for exploration help to promote knowledge creation.

**Intentional action: change in practice** – Learning conversations lead somewhere. Dialogue is purposeful and intentional. Action is a goal. This doesn't mean that this takes precedence over the depth of reflection, challenge and animated exchange. A deep learning conversation is both absorbing and energising in its possibilities. It may also be that further conversations are needed before changes are made, or individuals agree to seek out further knowledge outside of the conversation. But, there is underlying commitment that the new learning will be applied in some way to help enhance students' learning in line with the professional learning community principle of collective responsibility.

### ■■■ What else is needed to support learning conversations?

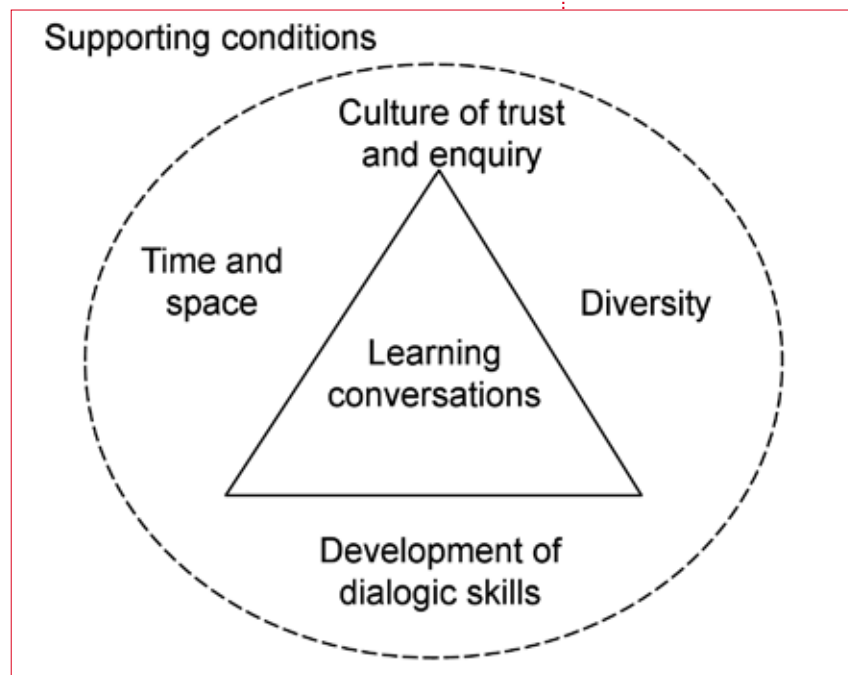
The serious business of learning conversations needs support. Effective professional learning communities provide these conditions.

**Culture of trust and enquiry** – The importance of trust can't be underestimated. A critical and often overlooked element of organisational culture, it is fundamental to the success of professional learning communities and what enables the hard effort of true collegiality to take place. This is both trust between teachers and between teachers and senior leaders, without which risks aren't taken. I've worked with a few schools where levels of trust were such that people were afraid to open up. The headteacher is critical in creating a culture of mutual trust. The enquiry-mindedness of individuals is also much more likely to be engendered in the wider culture of enquiry that pervades deeper learning communities and networks.

**Diverse perspectives** – Learning conversations are enriched by diverse exchanges. A community can get caught up in 'group-think', which is the antithesis of learning community. Diverse viewpoints are vital to learning communities (Watkins, 2005). Learning communities have to keep challenging themselves and, where necessary, invite outsiders to act as critical friends and help push their thinking further. As Charles Leadbeater (2008) argues in his book WE-THINK, in most fields "creativity emerges when people with different vantage points, skills and know-how combine their ideas to produce something new".

It is less comfortable when opinions differ, but differences can drive learning.

**Time and space** – Learning conversations need time and space. Finding time for learning is often a challenge; even more so when more than two or more people are involved. But creating time for learning conversations is important. They don't always have to be face-to-face. Virtual



learning conversations allow more flexibility around time – ‘hotseats’ offered by some leadership websites and online conferences are two examples using asynchronous communication – the stimulus is there for you to respond to, and you communicate when it suits you. On-line discussions are also stored so that you can follow the thread of the conversation – and also analyse it for the quality of the dialogue!

Locations for learning conversations also need careful thought. To ensure equality between all learning partners in networks, learning conversations can be rotated around schools or held within neutral community locations such as coffee shops. In the 18th Century, coffee houses were seen as locations for stimulating and sociable conversations where everyone’s contributions were treated as equal. But, maybe the members of your learning community live far apart and connect virtually. Using the metaphor of a traditional conference to design virtual conferences for educational leaders, Joni Falk and colleagues (Falk, Lee and Drayton, 2009) designed an interactive poster hall where people could browse posters, find ones of most interest and have a conversation with the presenter, and a lounge to ‘go’ to discuss topics and send instant, online private messages to other participants. The disadvantage can be that virtual conversations lack the particular dynamic that comes from face-to-face exchange.

**Development of dialogic skills** – Professional learning communities are locations for many development activities but attention to developing dialogic skills is not foremost amongst these. I have found that people often don’t have these skills. Dialogic skills enable participants to surface the ‘undiscussables’. Skills such as listening, questioning, challenging, probing, connecting and building on others’ ideas, and critical friendship enable members of a learning community to explore assumptions and develop shared meaning. Some of these skills can be honed through developing coaching relationships.

Developing these conditions is by no means straightforward. It takes commitment and its own time and energy, but without them, it’s unlikely such conversations will become the norm within or across schools.

## Conclusion

Lee Shulman (2004), a well respected American academic, suggested that you can compare the complexity of teachers’ work with that of hospital emergency rooms. Making sense of this complexity, taking on board new knowledge about learning, and being willing to change your practice accordingly is hard work. Change is more likely to be meaningful and sustainable if it has been talked through. Learning conversations are the conduit for much of the collaborative activity of professional learning communities and learning networks. It is important that they are deep and stimulating.

## Learning conversation self-evaluation questions

Think of a learning conversation you have recently had e.g. you carried out a joint classroom observation and had a follow up conversation, you analysed student work together etc. Here are some questions designed to help people reflect together on your conversation. Each question has been designed to capture an important aspect of learning conversations, based on research and theory about learning, effective professional learning, professional learning conversations, effective professional learning communities, dialogue, and cultures of improvement, as described earlier in this paper. Their aim is to help stimulate more powerful learning conversations in the future. Pick a couple of the questions. Make notes on the key points and anything you want to follow up.

1. To what extent do you judge the conversation you had actually to be a learning conversation, based on the features outlined? Did you even have one?
2. What has having this conversation helped you to achieve that you couldn’t have achieved on your own?
3. What value was there in considering alternative ways of doing and seeing things?
4. When do you think you were at your most reflective during the conversation?
5. Did anything come up in the conversation that made you rethink how you feel or what you believe about something important to you?

6. What risk(s) did you take in this conversation?
7. At what points did you notice that the conversation was at its deepest?
8. How did you come to agreement about the meaning of evidence or ideas you were discussing?
9. What did you discuss that pushed you to think really hard?
10. Did you have insights about learning and teaching of a specific subject?
11. How did you challenge each other without causing offence?
12. If you were starting this conversation again, how might you have got more learning out of it?

Here are some more general questions.

- Are learning conversations a common feature in your workplace?
- What are the challenges you face in stimulating learning conversations? Which conditions do you need to work on?
- What (else) might improve learning conversations in your workplace?
- How might you study learning conversations?

If you use these ideas and questions, I'd be interested to know what you come up with.

Grateful thanks to Lorna Earl, Julie Temperley, Jane Creasy and Helen Timperley with whom I have had valuable learning conversations on this topic. The London Borough of Ealing has supported my recent work in this area. Particular thanks to Julie Lewis, Keir Smith, Carrie Sharman and other local authority and secondary and special school colleagues whose professional learning community efforts have inspired me and who have shared their ideas generously, greatly enhancing my understanding. My understanding has also been greatly enriched by colleagues involved in Creative Leadership Learning projects and by my work with David Crandall and colleagues in England, New Zealand and the Netherlands on the Networking for Learning simulation.

### Notes

1. I am using learning in its broadest sense as used by Jacques Delors and colleagues in *Learning: The Treasure Within*. UNESCO – that is learning to know, to do, to live together. I am also bearing in mind the New Kinds of Smart Bill Lucas and Guy Claxton argue are needed in today's world (see Lucas and Claxton, 2010).

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