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Teacher and Professional Conversation



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Introduction

The importance of professional conversation for teacher professional development has been well acknowledged in the literature of teacher education. Variably called feedback conversation, post-lesson debrief conversation, post-observation conferences, teacher supervision/mentoring meeting, or guided reflective interview, teacher professional conversation encompasses a range of different setups including dyadic vs. multiparty, pre-service vs. in-service training, and with vs. without viewing of lesson recordings. Research literature on professional conversation reveals differing orientations to the nature of the conversation, which is closely tied to the view on teacher professional development and mentor roles in it. When teacher professional development is viewed as a social and communicative action, professional conversation constitutes the very site where this learning is generated and constituted. The notion of learning in interaction is readily expanded to knowledge construction in professional conversations. This entry provides an overview of possibilities and tensions of

professional conversations as a site for teacher learning and professional development.

This entry also reviews analytic frameworks and methodologies employed to analyze professional conversation during the past three decades – from using *a priori* coding schemes and categories to more discourse-oriented approaches such as linguistic ethnography and conversation analysis. The shift reflects the growing research interest in interactional dimensions of the speech event that, in fact, reflects the realization of the importance of interactional alignment between the mentor and the teacher for effective professional development to take place. While this entry will not be able to do justice to the vast research on *teacher and professional conversations*, it will present the state of the knowledge according to two distinctive themes that run through the entire literature: interactive process of professional conversation, and knowledge construction in professional conversations for teachers. It concludes by considering the questions of how professional conversations constitute opportunities for teacher learning, and how they can be better managed.

Mentoring Conversation Versus Collaborative Conversation

As reflected in the various labels used to refer to them, professional conversations for teachers take a wide variety of different setups. A useful distinction to make in viewing the vast landscape of

literature on *teacher and professional conversation* is to categorize them into mentoring conversation vs. collaborative conversation. The former refers to interaction organized with clearly marked institutional roles of the mentor (or the supervisor) and the teacher, whether in pre-service program or in the context of professional development. The latter, collaborative conversation, mostly involves teacher team meetings or professional learning circle meetings among in-service teachers. Another useful distinction is whether the conversation was arranged with a specific aim to provide feedback after the teaching practice or with a broader view of sharing problems and facilitating teacher development. The majority of published research on teacher professional conversation examines post-observation debrief conversations (Copland 2010) while some of them report on conversation generated in teacher work group setting, i.e., collaborative conversations.

The entry will provide a review on mentoring/supervision conversation first, i.e., conversations arranged for an apparent purpose of teacher education with clearly defined participant statuses, such as supervisor/mentor and teacher. Then, it moves on to review research on collaborative conversation.

Interactional Process/Dimensions of Mentoring Conversations

A call for research on the communicative process of supervisory interaction has been there for some time, though it is only recently that the volume of research in this line of inquiry has been increasing. Waite (1993) provides one of the very first works that examines supervisory interaction from a conversation analysis perspective combined with ethnographic methods. Through detailed analysis of five teacher-supervisor conferences, Waite illustrates how teachers construct different roles – passive, collaborative, and adversarial – moment-by-moment in face-to-face interaction, which in turn are linked to the supervisor’s interactional behavior, such as whether she has a strong agenda, competition for the floor, and fixed expectation of teacher-mentor roles.

Some studies draw on face and politeness theory to shed more light on our understanding of interactive process of feedback conferences. What has been in focus in this line of research is to describe delicate tension involved in addressing the teacher’s negative- and positive-face wants while clearly delivering advice and suggestions without “sugarcoating” it. There is a fine line between making suggestions and criticisms. More specifically, how mentors’ questions encourage participation and promote thinking with teaching interns have been examined. Drawing on linguistic ethnography and participation structure, Copland (2010) illuminates the tension perceived to exist in feedback sessions while also presenting an analysis from a perspective of face and politeness. From a conversation analysis perspective, Kim and Silver (2016) demonstrate how the sequential organization of an episode could affect and reflect the flow of teacher reflection as it is generated in teacher professional conversations. Most recently, in line with the latest trend in discourse analysis, the analytic focus was expanded to embodied features, such as gaze and body posture, and studies are examining how these nonverbal features are critical in establishing mutual orientation to each other in post-observation conversations.

Mentor Roles

One of the key themes of research on the interactive process of teacher professional conversation concerns mentor roles – the multifaceted nature of the mentor role, and how different roles are enacted moment-by-moment through mentors’ interactional behavior. As observed by Orland-Barak (2006), mentor roles are seen as diverse as “information sources, co-thinkers, inquirers, evaluators, supervisors, and learning companions” (p. 14). Attempts have been made to create a conceptual model for mentor roles in mentoring conversations (e.g., Mentors (teacher) Roles In Dialogues (MERID)), and to explore it empirically using statistics. In the aforementioned model, five dimensions are suggested to describe and analyze mentor-teacher supervisory behavior:

degree of input, degree of directiveness, speaking time, nature of the content, and phasing of the dialogue. Acknowledging diversity in mentoring situations and the limitation of the model based on frequencies of overt supervisory skills, the authors suggest that one way to use the model would be as a tool to facilitate reflection on mentoring style with a view to maximizing the match between a mentor teacher's supervisory approach and a student teacher's learning needs. Studies that attempted to apply this model seem to converge on the finding that mentors still tend to use a more directive mentoring approach, taking much more speaking time than mentees; and also to illustrate that when mentors assume nondirective roles, pre-service teachers' participation is greater. This corresponds to the findings from the broader research on mentoring that mentoring conversation can be more effective when structured in a way that gives primary voice to the teacher. As far as directive vs. nondirective mentoring style constitutes an important criterion for understanding mentoring style, future research seems to need a more fine-grained apparatus that would enable researchers to identify directive vs. nondirective mentoring styles (i.e., beyond counting the number of turns initiated by the mentor vs. the mentee) as they are realized in the context of mentoring conversations.

Teacher Professional Conversation as a Site for Knowledge Construction

Another focus which is slightly different from the research interest just reviewed, i.e., interactional dimension of teacher professional conversation, is found in the inquiry on knowledge construction in professional conversation.

Orland-Barak (2006) examined how different forms of dialogues, as they are generated in mentors' professional conversations, served to provide opportunities for collaboratively constructing professional knowledge or new understanding of their practice. An assumption embedded in this line of research is the importance of local and practitioner knowledge as opposed to disciplinary knowledge. Professional conversation is valued as a site where teachers

make their practice knowledge explicit through inquiry and verbalization. Tillema and Orland-Barak (2006) explore the relationship between professionals' views on knowledge and knowing in learning from conversation, and their evaluation of knowledge construction in professional conversations. They report that mentors' beliefs about knowledge and knowing are not necessarily aligned with their evaluations of knowledge construction in professional conversations, while the professional's recollections of memorable learning events are in accord with their evaluation of the outcome of knowledge construction in professional conversation. The study illustrates the importance of the activity in context and participation in collaborative inquiry as the significant influences upon the evaluation of the value of knowledge construction in professional conversation. The key insight provided by the studies in this line of inquiry is that they empirically demonstrate how participants' co-construction of professional knowledge "was enhanced by the infrastructure of engagement" (p. 604).

A slight shift of focus, though an overall similar line of inquiry, is found in studies that foreground narrative as the analytic unit. Note that these narratives are generated in what they call "guided conversations" or just an engagement with a colleague. It was shown that teacher's narratives generated in professional conversations served as a tool for knowledge-building that goes beyond local knowledge as well as provided a space for reflection on the individual teacher's professional learning and sociopolitical context related to her teaching career.

Influence of Sociocultural Theory

The narrative inquiry approach shares its insights with sociocultural theory-informed studies on teacher professional conversations. In this line of studies, mentoring is understood as *the mediation of professional learning*. The focus of inquiry often lies in understanding how dialogic space is created in mentoring conversations. More specifically, studies have looked at how the mediating tools such as student teachers' lesson plans,

protocols for structuring teacher professional conversations have been adopted and used by the students and teachers, what kinds of changes they have brought about, and how they did so. Research has shown, for example, how student teachers' lesson plans served to bring about changes in student teachers' attitude toward teaching from more task-oriented one to more concern about pupils' learning. Close documentation of accommodation process is another interesting focus to note. In one study that examined how protocols for structuring professional conversations have been gradually adopted and accommodated till they are *owned* by the teachers, the gradual process whereby the protocol interacts with local culture and is adapted by different individuals to a different extent is well documented, which provides invaluable insights as to how to better manage interactions designed for teacher professional development.

Collaborative Conversations

Unlike meetings arranged with a specific view of providing feedback after teaching practice, teachers also have team meetings organized for a broader purpose of mutual consultation or informal teacher conversation groups. Adopting ethnography and discourse analysis, studies that have looked at these groups' interaction explore how teachers' collaborative conversations afford and constrain teachers' learning opportunities. They report on emerging patterns of sharing concerns and answers, and what kinds of support conversation and storytelling can provide for teacher learning and inquiry. One of the supports that professional conversation provided the teachers was located in the fact that being able to verbalize their experience and voice in the public space of interaction served to raise teachers' experience to a level where scrutiny and analysis are encouraged and enabled. When shared in the public space of interaction, the experience readily lent itself to be the material for reflection, inviting feedback and comments from other voices. The studies also demonstrate how stories generated from teachers at different stages of their career

(pre-service, first-year and second-year teachers) differ from others.

Constraints are also identified. Meetings with the richest learning opportunities were found rare. Professional norms of privacy and autonomy were found to be one of the main culprits. Also, ironically, teachers' own framing of collaborative work – attending to interpersonal concerns, the tendency to avoid disagreement – was also found to foreclose learning opportunities.

Critical Discourse Analysis Perspective

Going beyond sociocultural theory, studies drawing on critical discourse analysis draw readers' attention to teachers' awareness of traditional power hierarchies within the classroom and the teachers' and students' roles conceptualized within that hierarchy. This hierarchy also expands to the relationship between CTs (Co-operating teachers) and pre-service teachers. The studies in this line of inquiry note that participant relationships in interactions between mentoring teachers and pre-service teachers are asymmetrical and how this power dynamics may affect the ways that pre-service teachers respond to the mentors' suggestions and their willingness to put across their views and question the mentors' interpretations.

Opportunities for Teacher Learning

Probably the most significant perspective under which teacher professional conversation was put into scrutiny will be to examine it for its potential for opportunities for teacher learning. More specifically, studies have examined whether and how teacher learning takes place in professional conversations, i.e., whether it provides an occasion for teachers to reflect on their practice and construct new knowledge through dialogue. By way of demonstrating how meanings are co-constructed and new understandings emerge through *interpersonal reasoning* in interaction, research along this line of inquiry expands our understanding of how complex dynamics of the conversational process mediates teacher learning,

which, in turn, enhances our knowledge on how to better manage interactions designed for teacher professional development. Some studies, drawing on large-scale data, developed a taxonomy to describe how different conversational processes differentially support teachers' professional learning while others focused more on examining micro-details of interactional structure of professional conversation. In the latter type of studies, the use of transcripts and recording of conversations are indispensable to zoom in on the concrete details of interactional behavior.

One main distinctive line of research that examines learning potential afforded in teacher professional conversations is reflective conversations. Given that the process of reflection is constant dialogue, it is only natural to pay attention to conversation as an arena where teachers are encouraged and provoked to undertake an inquiry into their practice, to engage in and verbalize their reasoning about alternative practices. Professional conversations constitute a site where teachers can articulate their understandings about their practice, which forms the prerequisite for the beginning of *interpersonal reasoning*.

Given the growing emphasis on the need for teacher collaboration for peer review of practice and peer coaching in teacher professional development, better understanding of interactional dynamics of professional conversations (whether dyadic or multi-party) seems to be in great demand.

Conclusion

This overview on research on teacher professional conversation reveals a diversity of the setup of teacher professional conversation: pre-service vs. in-service, mentoring vs. collaborative, focused on teaching practice vs. broader consultation and support group. The review also identified a few emerging themes around which studies can be classified. Under the broader inquiry of whether and how professional conversation served as an occasion for teacher learning, some studies focused on types of professional knowledge constructed in conversation (Orland-Barak 2006;

Tillema and Orland-Barak 2006) while others focused on interactional processes by examining negotiation of face (Copland 2010), participant alignment, participation structure, question format and sequential organization (Kim and Silver 2016), and embodied features such as gaze and body orientation. The research documented reveals a wide spectrum in terms of methodological approaches: from statistical analysis drawing on a model with predefined categories to mixed method research design (Tillema and Orland-Barak 2006), or use of qualitative discourse analysis and conversation analysis (Kim and Silver 2016; Orland-Barak 2006; Waite 1993).

Lastly, one of the findings on which current research on teacher and professional conversation seems to converge is the status quo of mentoring practice, where a directive mentoring style is still dominant. The potential benefits of adopting non-directive mentoring style for facilitating student teacher learning and teacher professional development have yet to be realized. The current review confirms that evidence for the potential of teacher professional conversation for teacher learning and reflection comes from diverse sources of research that span a range of theoretical and methodological backgrounds.

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