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‘We must get together and really talk¹ ...’. Connection, engagement and safety sustain learning and teaching conversation communities

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Over time, reflective conversations seem to have disappeared from everyday academic practice, yet such conversations have the potential to influence teachers’ sense of self as well as their teaching practice. To investigate the question – how can university teachers develop a community where conversations about learning and teaching continue to flourish? – this article analyses a case study of three groups of university teachers who took up the challenge to Talk About Teaching And Learning (TATAL). Each group employed social models of reflection to construct teaching philosophy statements and teaching portfolios through a process of writing stories as reflective inquiry. The investigation suggested three factors – connection, engagement and safety – facilitated these small groups of university teachers to build conversation communities. Further interrogation of these factors suggested a model to support the construction of ongoing teaching and learning conversations within and beyond higher education settings.

Keywords: collaborative inquiry; teaching philosophy; teaching portfolio; reflection; conversation communities

Introduction

Intuitively as academic developers we know the value of conversations about teaching and learning and have linked our conversations with each other to enhanced understandings about teaching and learning and to growing ourselves as teachers. Others, too, have made these connections (Barab, Barnett, & Squire, 2002; Harper, 1996; Warhurst, 2006). Gibbs, Knapper, and Piccini (2007, p. 2), for example, noted that ‘developing excellent teaching and maintaining that excellence usually involved a great deal of talking about teaching’. Over our careers we had initiated conversations with colleagues through peer partnerships, action learning sets and learning circles. Participants in such conversations agreed that they were valuable, yet, inevitably, the conversations petered out. Over time, reflective conversations seem to have disappeared from the everyday practice of our colleagues. ‘[F]aculty are reluctant to share either success or failures for fear of appearing boastful or foolish’ (Cranton & Carusetta, 2002, p. 168). Palmer (1998, p. 12) challenges us to

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make room to ‘grow as teachers ... to do something alien to academic culture ... talk to each other’ about our teaching and the learning of our students and, in so doing, question our beliefs, values and assumptions. But how could we respond to such a challenge given our experience of conversations to date?

In suggesting that ‘new forums need to be put in place to build a community of practice about teaching’, Gibbs et al. (2007, p. 2) open up a way forward. In such forums, an ‘expanded concept of reflection’ could become practice (Lyons, 1998, p. 254). Reflection could move from being ‘a solitary, individual enterprise to become critical, collaborative conversations’ that take place over time (Lyons, 1998, p. 254). However, it seemed unlikely that such connections would happen by themselves in our university! So how could we establish such connections? What would the connecting spaces look like and feel like from the inside, from the participants’ viewpoints? And what would grow and sustain these connections?

In answering these questions this article responds to Clegg’s (2009) recent call for more research-based accounts of practice by exploring reflection within and on teaching practice as a collaborative activity. It also responds to calls by Ash and Clayton (2004) and Rogers (2001) for detailed examples of the application of the practice of reflection, and Lyons’s (2006, p. 151) concern over ‘the lack of research on what teachers learn from reflective inquiry’. The article opens for investigation the lost academic practice of groups of teachers regularly talking about learning and teaching. The outcomes of this investigation advance thinking about constructing learning and teaching communities by identifying three factors – connection, engagement and safety – necessary for a successful conversation community and a process of inquiry to support sustainability of such communities which could be generalised to other learning organisations.

The paper analyses a case study of three groups of university teachers who took up Palmer’s (1998) challenge to TATAL, that is, to Talk About Teaching And Learning. The social model of reflective inquiry employed in the TATAL groups to construct teaching philosophy statements and teaching portfolios is described in the following section. In this paper analysis of the groups’ interactions responds to the question: *How can university teachers develop a community where conversations about learning and teaching continue to flourish?* That is, the focus is the process rather than the products (i.e. the philosophy statement and the teaching portfolio). The outcomes reported in the next section suggest that conversation communities can be rediscovered and sustained when talking about teaching and learning occurs within a safe space, where social models of reflection connect people with a purpose to create ownership through a sense of community that then furthers ongoing connections and continuing reflective inquiry.

TATAL conversations

Context

TATAL conversations are co-sponsored by ACT HERDSA (a branch of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia) and the University of Canberra (UC) Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) Promoting Excellence Initiative (see <http://www.altc.edu.au/promoting-excellence-initiative>). TATAL seeks to:

- Provide a safe collaborative cross-discipline and cross-institutional environment in which to investigate the challenges and successes of teaching and learning;

- Develop enhanced skills and confidence in writing about and sharing teaching and learning experiences; and
- Provide support for colleagues preparing applications for teaching awards and fellowships.

Participants

The first TATAL group began in September 2008 with 16 colleagues from three local universities. In 2009 and 2010, this first group continued with six participants and the two facilitators (now members of the self-facilitating group) meeting monthly for two hours. The 2009 program began with 12 participants and continued into 2010 with six regular attendees and the two facilitators. The co-facilitated 2010 program began in March with 12 participants and has moved into its second semester of sessions. Both the 2009 and the 2010 groups meet for two hours monthly.

Each group is multi-disciplinary. Participants teach accounting, aerospace engineering, geography, history, business, school education, law, nursing, librarianship, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), tourism, peace studies and educational design. In all groups, most participants were UC staff. Participants were also employed at The Australian National University, University of New South Wales (Australian Defence Force Academy campus) and the Australian International Hotel School. The teaching experience of participants was diverse. For example, of those staff continuing in the 2008 and 2009 groups, two are casual staff members (one in the first year of teaching), five are early career academics and seven are experienced tertiary teachers. All participants volunteered. They were attracted to the program using emails, flyers and face-to-face information sessions.

Theoretical framing

TATAL conversations drew together the literatures around social models of reflection, teaching philosophy statements and teaching portfolios, and writing stories as reflective inquiry including:

- Professional (situated) learning;
- Transformative learning through critical thinking;
- Dialogue with others that promotes deeper individual and personal learning;
- Purposeful focus on values, beliefs and assumptions;
- Guided support creating reflective moments; and
- Narrative ways of knowing (see Table 1).

Within this framing, reflection was defined using the definitional elements identified by Rogers (2001):

- A cognitive and affective process;
- Requires active engagement on the part of an individual;
- Triggered by an unusual or perplexing situation or experience;
- Involves examining responses, beliefs and premises; and
- Results in integration of the new understanding into experience.

Table 1. Theoretical framing of TATAL conversations.

Conversation characteristic	Theorist	Theoretical basis for the characteristic
Professional learning	Argyris & Schon (1974) Boud, Keogh, & Walker (1985)	Espoused theory & theory-in-use. Turning experience into learning/ Learning in the workplace/Situated learning.
Transformative learning through critical thinking	Mezirow (2000) Schon (1983)	Understanding one's core beliefs and the assumptions that come from them. Looking for experiences which are 'out of kilter' with one's assumptions. Interrogating those assumptions to find a new way forward.
Dialogue with others	Ghaye & Ghaye (1998) Kahn (2007) O'Farrell (2007) Senge (1990)	Dialogue with others 'can ensure that the process [of reflection] is not confined within narrow patterns of thought, but challenges the participant and allows for insights that result in a process of the appropriate depth... processes occur between people and are only then internalised' (Kahn, 2007, p. 16).
Purposeful focus on values, beliefs & assumptions	Kennelly (2005) Lyons (1998) O'Farrell (2007) Schonwetter et al. (2002)	<i>A teaching philosophy</i> is a narrative description of beliefs, values, rationale and insights into learning and teaching and how these inform teaching. <i>A teaching portfolio</i> is a professional development portfolio for continuous teaching improvement; a compilation of learning intentions, accounts of learning activities/experiences, learning outcomes, & records of reflective dialogues.
Guided support	Ghaye & Ghaye (1998) Kahn (2007) Lyons (1998) O'Farrell (2007)	Reflection 'must be both targeted and supported' (Kahn, 2007, p. 15). 'It is not enough simply to group participants together and hope that the social processes will result in learning' (O'Farrell, 2007, p. 5).
Narrative ways of knowing	Brookfield (1995) McCormack (2009) Richardson (2000) Schon (1983)	Stories provide a starting point for critical inquiry (Richardson, 2000). Writing, reading and listening to stories of learning and teaching experiences helps academics to 'see into themselves to see what they may not have seen previously, or to see the familiar through different eyes' (McCormack, 2009, p. 143).

TATAL sessions

Each group came together for the common purpose of constructing a teaching philosophy statement and a teaching portfolio (see Figure 1). Initially each group committed to working together to achieve these outcomes over the course of a year with the support of the authors as co-facilitators.

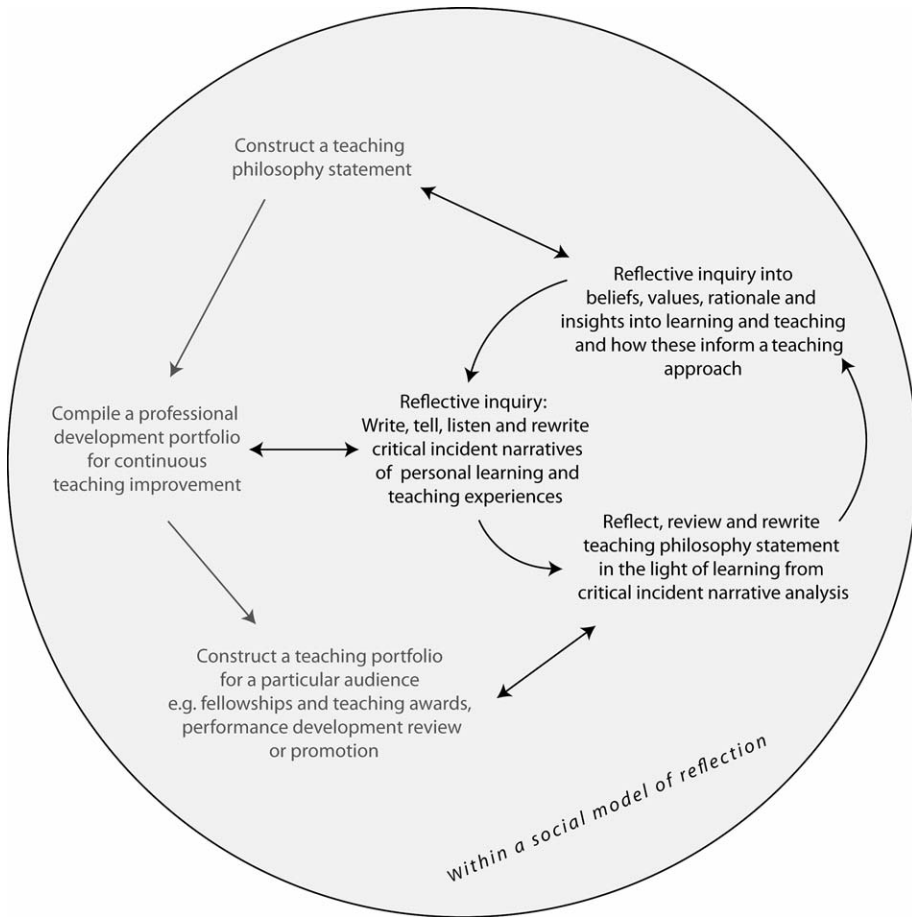


Figure 1. TATAL sessions within a social model of reflective inquiry.

The first session of each group introduces the program (context, aims, objectives and purposes) and the process of collaborative reflective inquiry that underpins each group’s interactions. Expectations of facilitators and of the participants are discussed and a list of group expectations negotiated. Ground rules to guide group interaction are brainstormed and agreed. In each of the next four sessions each participant constructs a teaching philosophy statement using a three-part process as follows:

- (1) Engage in a guided collaborative dialogue about each of the following questions:
 - Why is being a teacher important to you? What personal experience(s) inform/motivate your teaching today? Why is this experience important enough for you to remember it today? (TATAL session 2)
 - What do you believe about teaching? Why do you hold these beliefs? (TATAL session 3)
 - What do you believe about learning? Why do you hold these beliefs? (TATAL session 4)

- How are these beliefs played out in your teaching context? (TATAL session 5)
- (2) The dialogues are supported by facilitator-initiated interactive activities; for example, a discussion in TATAL session 5 of frameworks for writing a teaching philosophy statement.
 - (3) Each session closes with a period of individual free writing responses to one of the questions (see 1 above) that will be discussed at the next session. Free writing involves each participant in a process of letting go and letting the pen capture a stream of consciousness triggered by reflections on the question asked. Participants continue to write their response between sessions.

Collaborative feedback on each person's completed teaching philosophy statement occurs in TATAL session 6. At TATAL session 7 participants turn the focus of their conversations onto the construction of a teaching portfolio. During the following three TATAL sessions, participants follow (flexibly) a narrative inquiry process to individually write critical incident teaching and learning stories through structured reflection. Critical incidents are 'vivid happenings that for some reason people remember as being significant' (Brookfield, 1995, p. 114). During each session, each group member interrogates their story within the collaborative TATAL environment, illustrated for TATAL session 9 in Figure 2.

In the final two sessions of the initial program participants review their teaching philosophy statement in the light of the storying process undertaken over the previous sessions and discuss the framework they have chosen for ongoing development of their teaching portfolio. These sessions also look to the future to discuss program and process options to continue portfolio development.

TATAL evaluation

Evaluation across the three TATAL groups has gathered information from participants and the facilitators using a variety of methods (see Table 2). A process of constant comparison was employed to search across the methods and sources of information for commonalities and differences.

The following section investigates the question: *How can university teachers develop a community where conversations about learning and teaching continue to flourish?* It is suggested that a safe and supportive, diverse and dynamic collegial environment, in which participants are nourished through collaborative reflective processes, facilitates the construction of a teaching philosophy statement/teaching portfolio and the emergence of a sustainable conversation community.

Developing a conversation community

Professional, personal and process outcomes emerged from the TATAL evaluation. The outcomes coalesced into four themes.

- (1) 'A safe space to discuss learning and teaching';
- (2) Connecting people 'across disciplines' and 'across institutions';
- (3) Collaborative reflective process 'helped us develop as teachers'; and
- (4) 'Learning the specifics' of constructing a teaching philosophy statement and a teaching portfolio. (McCormack, 2010)

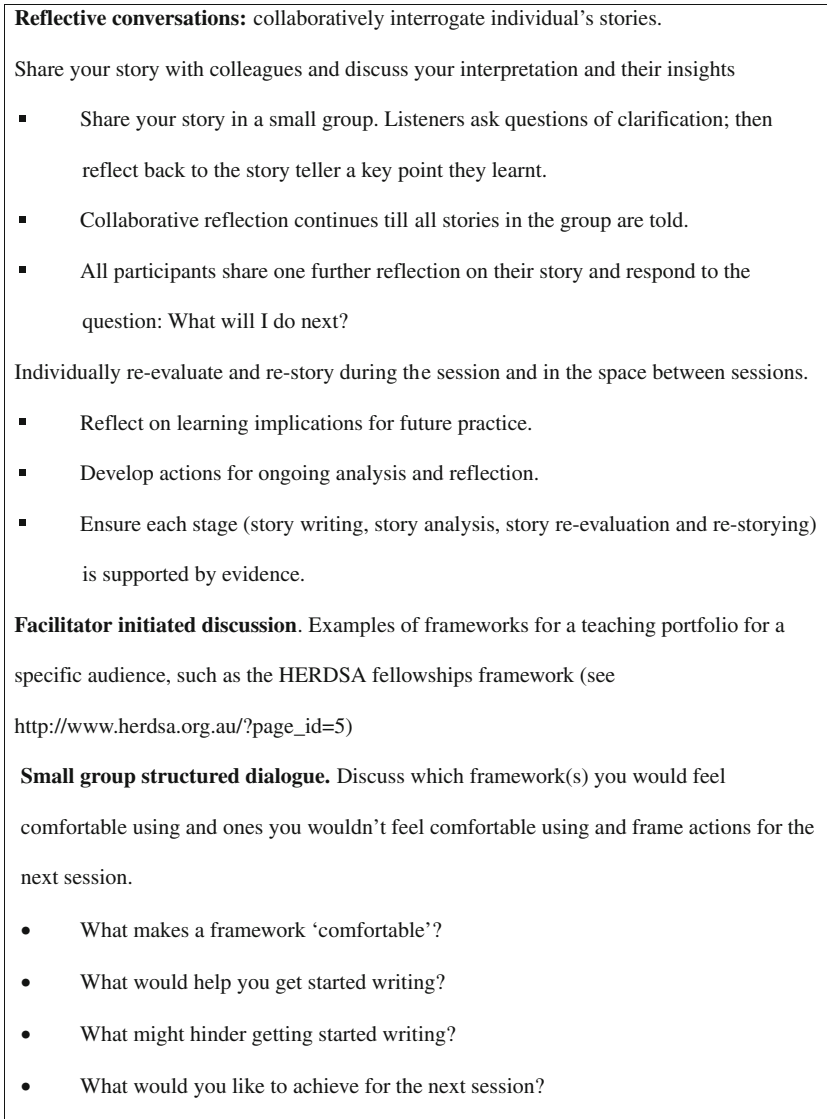


Figure 2. Structure of TATAL session 9 conversations.
 Note: For information about other TATAL sessions, see McCormack & Kennelly (2009, 2010).

Analysis across these themes suggested connection, engagement and safety were the key factors that led to the establishment of the TATAL conversation communities that continue to flourish beyond their initially proposed life (see Figure 3). Together, these factors facilitated risk taking and discovery. There were personal discoveries about participants' sense of self as a teacher and professional discoveries about teaching practice. There were also discoveries about the scholarship of and for learning and teaching. These discoveries contributed to journal and conference publications and recognition and reward through teaching awards. The emerging sense of ownership furthered ongoing connection as a conversation community.

Table 2. Methods of gathering information by sources of information.

Methods*	Sources of information	
	Participants	Facilitators
Program expectations discussions	Group discussion during TATAL session 1 and mid-program review of expectations (2008, 2009 and 2010 groups)	Reflection on program advertising and information sessions. Mid-program review of expectations
Surveys (open & closed questions)	Mid-program survey (2008, 2009 and 2010 groups) and end of year 1 survey (2008 and 2009 groups)	Facilitator reflections on survey responses
Focus group discussion	2008 and 2009 participants conducted by an external evaluator at the end of 2009	
Informal feedback	Emails and TATAL conversations (2008, 2009 and 2010 groups)	Facilitator reflections on conversations within and outside TATAL sessions

*A detailed description of each of the methods of gathering information is available in McCormack (2010).

Connection

Participants found connection within the diversity of the TATAL social place. Different backgrounds, institutions, disciplines, years of teaching experience and position levels characterised this diversity and facilitated participants' learning about learning and teaching:

One of its strengths is the mix of disciplines in the group because we each come from a different perspective. I think it helps to have different levels of teaching experience in the group too. For instance, some of [name of participant] comments have really made me think about things I have been doing without much thought for years... (2008 participant, email 23 October 2009)

Exchange of ideas with other academics, especially from other universities helped me learn. (2009 participant, mid-program survey)

Such 'border crossing' (McAlpine, 2005, p. 2) encouraged the recognition and acknowledgement of the 'divergent ways of thinking and speaking' held within the different disciplines. The freedom offered by this diversity contributed to an atmosphere where it was possible to be non-judgemental. Connections across institutions, disciplines and teaching experience provided, as suggested by Harper (1996, p. 251), 'conditions for more meaningful discussion and self-reflection'. The connections also facilitated the emergence and acknowledgement of commonality within the groups' diversity:

... discovering that all of us, not just me, experience pain in our teaching. (2009 participant, TATAL session 7 conversations)

Teachers have common concerns/issues/ideas regardless of discipline. (2009 participant, TATAL session 1)

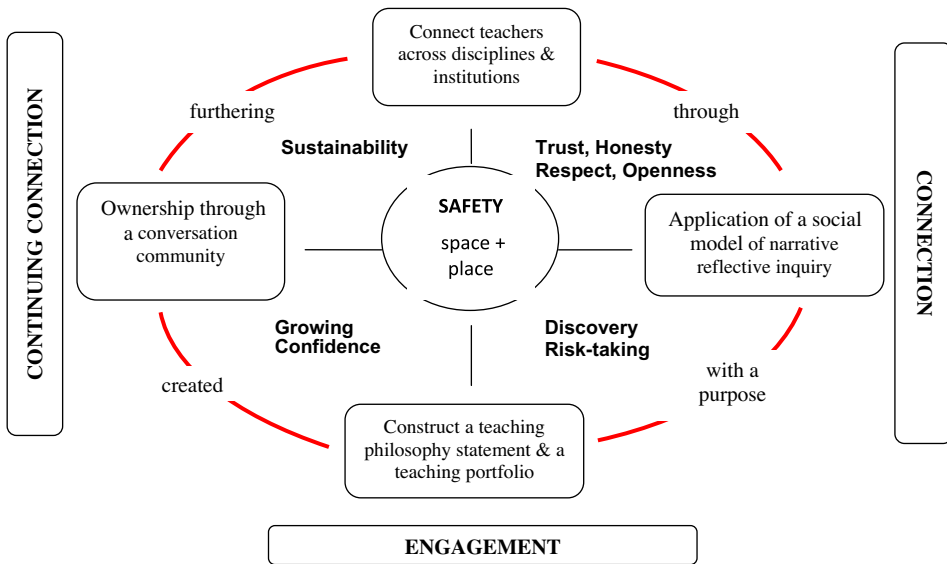


Figure 3. Three key factors – connection, engagement and safety – construct an ongoing conversation community.

Reflective thinking: discussing common and uncertain teaching experiences. A chance to enrich what we do. (2009 mid-program survey)

Construction of a shared understanding of being teachers ‘is one of the most effective mechanisms for promoting improvement and enhancing productivity’ (Theall, 2010, p. 16).

Engagement

TATAL sessions engaged participants for a purpose through a process aligned with that purpose. The purpose was to construct a teaching philosophy statement and a teaching portfolio, and the process was one of guided reflective dialogue prompted by individual story writing and collaborative story sharing. Both purpose and process sought to bring into consciousness participants’ mental models and subject them to reflective investigation with others. Mental models are ‘deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world’ (Senge, 1990, p. 8) and are ‘a foundation for personal action’ (Haigh, 2005, p. 8).

Together, the TATAL purpose and the process helped participants expose their mental models because both asked each participant to ‘think fundamentally about my beliefs and philosophy’ (2010 participant, mid-program survey). One 2010 participant described this thinking as ‘learning beyond teaching’ (mid-program survey). Thinking in this way led participants to wonder how their beliefs and assumptions related to their practice and for some, to discover a ‘disconnect’ between beliefs and practices:

An understanding of how to think about and reflect on and connect with my beliefs about teaching and learning with my actual practice of teaching. It has been interesting

to look at whether there is congruence between the two. (2008 participant, mid-program survey)

I explored my inner self and discovered a gap between the inner 'self' and the teaching 'self'; you need to be true to yourself. (2009 participant, TATAL session 7 conversations)

The majority of participants in all TATAL groups agreed that they had increased their understanding of their beliefs about teaching and about student learning (2008 and 2009 mid-program and end-of-year 1 surveys, 2010 mid-program survey). Their emerging understandings were reflected in comments such as 'students are not empty vessels', 'teaching isn't about a textbook' (2010 participants, TATAL session 7 discussions) or 'I realised you have to teach the students you have not the students you want to have' (2009 participant, TATAL session 7 conversation). These discoveries helped participants 'develop as teachers' (2008 participant, email 26 March 2010) as illustrated by the following outcomes:

I learned that though I have been teaching for a very long time, I have been teaching without having ever asked myself why I am doing this as a profession. (2008 participant, mid-program survey)

I hadn't thought about why I became a teacher. I thought of myself as a [name of profession]. Now I think I am a teacher. (2010 participant, TATAL session 7 conversations)

Engagement through purpose and process generated an excitement for sharing their discoveries as one participant eagerly wrote in an email to group members:

... there is something I would love to bring to the session. [name of participant] and I have been working on a graduate attribute we call net centric learning and I tried it out on my PG students – and the success has amazed us. So I would really like to be able to tell you about it ... and see what comments/criticisms/suggestions everyone may have. (2008 participant, email 21 October 2009)

Participants were prompted to acknowledge a need to reflect critically on their teaching practice – 'the key learning for me was the need to reflect on what I am doing in my teaching' (2009 participant end-of-year survey) – as well as to strengthen existing reflective practice as happened for the following 2008 participant:

An important opportunity to strengthen my reflective practice in a way that has directly influenced and enhanced my learning and teaching ... provides me with a regular opportunity to gain and share stories about learning and teaching and has provided me with new knowledge about the role of the teaching philosophy statement, teaching portfolio and the application for formal recognition of learning and teaching practice. Examples of where TATAL has influenced my teaching practice include using story-telling to help promote students to share their experience as a bridge from theory to practice, adopting new facilitation techniques such as FISH-BOWL to promote student centred learning and regularly drawing attention to my mood and emotion as a way of illustrating the way in which mood and emotion influences individual work-related behaviour. (Excerpt from a successful teaching award application)

Participants' engagement in scholarly dialogues generated new ideas and further inquiries into learning and teaching:

Discussions with other TATAL participants have often given me new ideas for avenues of thinking about a problem and actually ways of studying it. (2008 participant, mid-program survey)

Cross-institutional and intra-institutional research projects emerged both within and across TATAL groups. For instance, one cross-institutional team began an investigation into whether students learn what they think they learn. Another team (drawn from TATAL 2008 and 2009) is investigating whether students with particular learning styles gravitate to certain subject areas and whether teaching can alter a student's learning style preferences. As noted by Schonwetter, Sokal, Friesen, and Taylor (2002, p. 87) as 'teaching philosophy statements are exchanged, scholarly dialogues on teaching [are] encouraged'.

TATAL makes us think about how we teach and also about how we align our teaching with the scholarship of teaching. This has led to direct research outcomes:

Although we might have done teaching research without TATAL – and some of us were doing it already – TATAL provides a place where we can discuss our ideas with colleagues and get their feedback. I have years of research ideas jotted down simply because of comments my TATAL colleagues have made. I may not turn them all into fully-fledged research projects but it makes me aware of how research can underpin and strengthen my teaching. (2008 participant email, 25 March 2010)

Safety

Connection and engagement contributed to the development of TATAL as a safe space (i.e. TATAL created headspace in which each group member felt free to think, to be and to become). A sustainable conversation community also requires a physical place that fosters a sense of safety through trust, respect and honesty. TATAL's safe place was a room with a view and a TATAL cake; that is, a room with natural ambience and a special monogrammed carrot cake for afternoon tea. The room was large and airy with plenty of natural light. As facilitators, we strove to enhance this sense of place by modelling behaviour that was respectful, non-judgemental and disciplined in its processes.

Participants described the sense of safety engendered by the social and physical place of TATAL as critical to facilitating discussions about teaching and learning and to seeking feedback from colleagues. For one 2009 participant TATAL sessions became the 'only time in the week I can reflect on what I'm doing; a refuge' (TATAL session 7 conversation). A 2008 participant commented that in TATAL 'we are all there to help each other, which is a strength of TATAL – so no one has to go it alone' (email 12 July 2009).

Summary

Connection, engagement and safety created a space in a place where individual and collective openness to risk taking was possible. The fear of feeling foolish identified by Cranton and Carusetta (2002) was not evident in participants' interactions:

... teaching is not very well supported and it can be hard to innovate or even discuss teaching matters ... If you say you have any issues, there is an assumption that you are a bad teacher. It is great to have the supportive environment of TATAL where we can air issues and problems and get ideas from each other. (2008 participant, email 23 October 2009)

Participants' critical incident narratives shared both successes and personally confronting moments (see Table 3). The latter had, until TATAL, remained private and unsharable, and so evoked intensely felt emotions in their telling to the group. Some emotions were shared with colleagues for the first time: hurt; anger; frustration; and abuse. Through sharing, contradictory emotions could be negotiated to open 'the door for learning and professional growth', as suggested by Allard et al. (2007, p. 307).

Writing a teaching philosophy statement and compiling a teaching portfolio involves an individual in intense scrutiny of their conceptions, values, principles and their teaching practice. The identity work involved in the construction and reconstruction of a teaching portfolio, for example, provokes a range of emotions. In their investigation of the emotional dimension of compiling a teaching portfolio FitzPatrick and Spiller (2010, p. 175) note that 'a range of different emotions of various intensities [is] experienced over the duration of the compilation process'. The teaching philosophy statement, as Beatty, Leigh, and Lund Dean (2009, p. 112) note, also provokes intense emotions 'because one's teaching philosophy is such a core element of one's identity as a teacher, direct criticism of one's teaching philosophy is akin to a direct assault on the self'.

Authors' reflections

Connection and engagement within a safe place enhanced participants' reflective conversation skills and their confidence in these skills. The majority of participants in all groups agreed that they had: increased their skills in talking about teaching with colleagues and in writing about their teaching; increased their personal reflection skills; and increased their confidence in talking and writing about their teaching (2008 and 2009 mid-program and end-of-year 1 surveys; 2010 mid-program survey). Supported by their growing knowledge, skills and confidence in talking and writing about learning and teaching, participants found a space in which to discover, re-imagine and to innovate:

My confidence in myself as a teacher has increased. I feel more willing to try to implement types of assessment that allow students to take their own risks with their learning (with the hope that they may learn more than if the assessment only asks them to play it safe). I think this will help students to feel more confident too. (2010 participant, mid-program survey)

Table 3. Examples of critical incident narrative topics, 2008 and 2009 TATAL groups.

Narratives of success	Personally confronting narratives
The best exam ever	How to deal with hurtful student comments?
Assessment to achieve better learning outcomes	I want to be able to inspire students to find out more, I don't want to conduct a 'Gestapo' tutorial
Learning to do something completely new	Taking plagiarism personally

TATAL has been very important in reinforcing my learning as a new member of faculty. It has provided reassurance and inspiration which has assisted my development of skills and confidence. (2010 mid-program survey)

The nature of these discoveries suggests that TATAL conversations improve an individual's capacity to improve their teaching by increasing their understandings about teaching and learning and their understandings about themselves as teachers; that is, it changed the way participants interacted with their teaching. There was also some evidence that TATAL conversations prompted participants to think about improving learning and teaching beyond the group:

Working with the others to improve teaching and learning at UC. (2009 participant, mid-program survey)

I plan to help other academic staff benefit from reflection on their teaching/assessment practice and their underlying motivations. (2008 participant, mid-program survey)

Constructing the conversation communities wasn't all plain sailing. Maintaining a viable group was sometimes a challenge. Some sessions were small. Participants moved in and out of the groups as teaching timetables changed each semester. A small number of participants left the university. For some participants the intensity of competing priorities meant that withdrawal was the only option. Competing commitments related to work and further study or to research publications:

I was afraid this was going to happen this year ... my study and work commitments mean that something has to get pushed off the end of the perch ... TATAL was my reflective practice and peer coaching time. (2008 participant, email 16 March 2009)

Currently, I am working around 70 hours per week ... I do value the discussion that takes place around the practice and scholarship of teaching and have enjoyed being involved with the developing community of practitioners who are committed to teaching and learning. (2008 participant, email 27 February 2009)

After only six months it was suggested by participants in both the 2008 and 2009 TATAL groups that each group could become a sustainable conversation community:

Support from a community of teaching and learning interests. (2009 participant mid-program survey)

Great networking making for creative conversations. (2008 participant, mid-program survey)

That this potential to form a conversation community has been realised is evidenced by the extension of both the 2008 and 2009 group sessions beyond the initial expected life of the program (one year). The 2008 participants are now a self-facilitating group that has been meeting for three years. The 2009 group continues to meet two years after their initial meeting. However, we acknowledge that surrounding the conversation communities (see Figure 3) is an institutional culture characterised by a managerialist and a limiting research focus which has proved to be problematic for the growth of collaborative reflective practice groups. Ideally these

groups thrive in a collegial atmosphere with senior leaders championing the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

This article investigated the process through which three groups of university teachers developed a community in which conversations about learning and teaching continue to flourish. Existing theoretical and practical literature has given extensive guidance on what makes groups work (for example, Hunter, Bailey, & Taylor, 1992). The work of Wenger (1998) has provided guidance on construction of communities of practice. Less guidance, however, is evident in relation to the development of conversation communities for teachers in today's higher education context where conversations about learning and teaching tend to peter out rather than flourish.

TATAL participants' experiences suggest that three factors in particular – connection, engagement and safety – provided what Allard et al. (2007, p. 309) term the 'glue' to hold each group together as a conversation community. Successful conversation communities need to be built deliberately and systematically and require this 'glue' to facilitate sustainability. When this 'glue' is in place, sustainable conversations about learning and teaching are possible within a safe place where social models of reflection connect people with a purpose to create ownership that furthers ongoing connections and continuing reflective inquiry. TATAL connections were a dynamic ingredient because they occurred across disciplines and across institutions. Drawing on diverse expertise and institutional perspectives promoted non-judgemental feedback that informed participants' teaching.

The TATAL process was different from most approaches to writing a teaching philosophy. These approaches generally offer only descriptive lists of questions regarding one's beliefs about students and the role of teachers and teaching. The TATAL process did incorporate such questions; however, its grounding in a social model of reflective inquiry, with its emphasis on guided dialogue, meant that the conversations were 'more than a confessional' (McCormack & Pamphilon, 2004, p. 23) or simply 'mulling over' (O'Farrell, 2007, p. 4). This process of inquiry gave 'permission' to listen and to allow (as suggested by Harper [1996, p. 261]) 'the conversation text itself to speak out and assert its viewpoint'. It was from the silent space between the speaking that personal insights emerged. These insights extend knowledge beyond tips and traps (i.e. knowing-how), to collectively build the knowing-why of one's teaching (i.e. an individual's values, beliefs and motivations). Knowing-why conversations construct 'real talk' (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Narule, 1986, p. 144) 'which reaches deep into the experience of each participant' to explore those experiences to construct and reconstruct their identity as teachers. Such a space could then support continuing inquiry through narrative construction of a teaching portfolio which, in turn, further deepened the identity work individuals undertook because teaching portfolio construction is 'inevitably guided by one's theory of teaching and learning' (Lyons, 1998, p. 6) and encourages ongoing challenging and developing of that theory.

Within any group there is likely to be 'significant variation' for individuals in their experiences of the process and the outcomes emerging (Kahn et al., 2008, p. 168). In addition, there will be factors in play that are beyond the control of the program facilitator and participants. For instance, the nature of the research/teaching culture, and the relative values of research and teaching, can vary within and across

institutions. Conflicting messages about the valuing of teaching can influence individuals' willingness to engage in collaboration. Personal professional learning is also likely to be affected if, as suggested by Beatty et al. (2009, p. 124), an individual discovers that their teaching philosophy is 'at odds with policies in place that they do not have the power to change'. Can conversation communities such as TATAL survive such discoveries? How long can they survive? And, for long-term sustainability, how can TATAL processes and outcomes be extended to more staff? These are some of the questions for ongoing investigation by the TATAL groups.

So, what might a TATAL group do to positively influence the organizational culture? It could forge organizational connections to open up opportunities to positively influence the organization's culture:

- Strategically position its conversations, for example, have champions in key places (across the organizational structure in addition to a champion in senior management), nurture these people and establish effective channels of communication with them;
- Strategically position individuals and the group within the organizational structure, for example, individuals could volunteer for committee membership and contribute TATAL perspectives to the committee's deliberation. A TATAL group could contribute the group's perspectives when public comment is sought on a policy change or an organizational change;
- Map individual and group outcomes, keep the map up-to-date and ensure the TATAL group is recognized for these outcomes in formal institutional processes such as performance review, promotion or teaching award applications; and
- Embed in departmental cultures the culture of TATAL with the use of rituals (the personal informal sharing that occurs at the start of a TATAL), symbols (the TATAL cake) and language (the use of the word TATAL as a synonym for collaborative reflective practice).

It is important to acknowledge when discussing the significance of the TATAL conversations that the processes described in this paper were trialled with only three small groups. The outcomes discussed are those arising in one study only; repetition in other contexts at other institutions is needed. It is hoped that this small study will inspire others to create time in similar spaces to talk about teaching and learning.

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Note

1. Harper, 1996, p. 252 (original emphasis).

Notes on contributors

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