Teacher professional discourse and learning: what we talk about when we talk about our practice

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Four Questions

1. Why should we care about teacher professional conversations?
2. What do we talk about when we talk about our practice?
3. What sort of professional conversations make us smarter about our practice?
4. So what? (or, What can I take from this talk back to my school?)
Why teacher professional conversations?

• Sometimes a group is smarter than its individual members (i.e., the whole is greater than the sum of its smarts)

• But sometimes the opposite is the case: the group is not as smart as each of its members, and indeed causes them to act stupidly
Why discourse? Discourse shapes...

• **Gaze**: What we can see; What we notice as important – e.g. distinguishing figure from background.

• **Speech**: What we can say; Who can say what.

• **Thought**: What is thinkable; What is considered to be unquestionably true or foolish.

Michel Foucault  Charles Goodwin  Jan Blommaert
An example:
What do you see?
What does a radiologist see?
“The radiograph demonstrates a relatively flat opacified line at the right hemidiaphragm characteristic of an effusion. In addition, the upper surface of the right middle lobe fissure is more sharply visible which tends to occur when there is fluid in that fissure. The lateral radiograph shows loss of the costophrenic angle posteriorly on the right.”

(http://www.yale.edu/imaging)
Professional Discourse and Learning

- Professional learning happens all the time, for good and for bad, as consequence of engaging in work (and not as an event separate from work)
But teaching is different from medicine

- Teachers teach alone, behind closed doors;
- Teaching cannot be easily paused for consultation;
- Teaching cannot be easily shared as an object for inquiry and discussion;
- Most educational institutions are not designed to support collaboration and mutual learning;
- School norms often do not support collaboration and mutual learning
Teacher informal learning – an example

• Fraic, a history and geography teacher, arrives in a new school

• Edited excerpt from “Entre Les Murs” (The Class), directed by Laurent Cantet

• What does he learn in his first hour at work?
What does Fraic learn in his first hour at work?
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Nine informal rules governing teacher professional discourse
Rule #1 – Don’t talk about pedagogical problems


“Schoolteaching has endured largely as an assemblage of entrepreneurial individuals whose autonomy is grounded in norms of privacy and noninterference and is sustained by the very organization of teaching work.”

Talk about classroom practice tends to be about ventilation, consolation (normalizing problems of practice), or sharing of materials
Rule #2 – Don’t mind the gap between teaching aspirations and classroom realities

“In open discussion, the first response of the teachers in the groups we assembled was to criticise the teachers in the recordings... But this soon gave way to the admission that episodes like these were familiar, and although traditional order could still be found, classroom relations in urban comprehensive secondary school contexts in London had changed.”
Rule #3 – Dichotomize!

- The Old vs. New Education
- Teacher-centred vs. child-centred
- Knowledge transmission vs. development of thinking
- Achievement outcomes vs. values education
- External control vs. intrinsic motivation
- Content vs. process
Rule #4 – Trust your own unique experience

Maybe you should try....

That may work well for you; my class is different.
Rule #5 – No precise professional language

Philip Jackson, *Life in Classrooms* (2nd ed., 1990): “One of the most notable features of teacher talk is the absence of a technical vocabulary. Unlike professional encounters between doctors, lawyers, garage mechanics, and astrophysicists, when teachers talk together almost any reasonably intelligent adult can listen in and comprehend what is being said” (p. 143).
Rules for talking about video-recordings of practice...
Rule #6 – Hyper-criticize!

• Tony Robinson, a comedian and actor trying his hand at teaching, receives feedback from an experienced teacher

• Edited excerpt from “The Teaching Challenge” (UK Teacher’s TV)

• What’s happening? And why? Is this situation familiar to you?
What’s happening? And why? Is this situation familiar to you?

0:45
Rule #7 – Focus on what’s missing...

... rather than what is present (e.g. talk about what the teacher should have done rather than what actually happened).

Collaborative learning tasks would have...

In such a case I would prefer...

If she’d given him a chance to answer it would have led to...
Rule #8 – Trust your feelings and intuition

No need to justify or provide evidence.

The children were really engaged... note the sparkle in their eyes

I felt that they were bored.

Each to her own.
Rule #9 – Everything is due to the teacher

We often adopt rather “teacher-centred” interpretations of classroom practice, attributing to the teacher almost magical powers to shape events. In such a way we overlook the other influences that shape and constrain teachers’ actions. Pupils shape teaching no less than teachers do. Likewise, policy, curriculum, architecture, time-table, and assessment are powerful factors.
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Rules for Professional Conversations that Make Us Smarter about Our Practice

1. Focus on the core work of teaching: classroom practice;

2. Anchor discourse to rich representations of practice and base claims on evidence from them;

3. Adopt an inquiry stance: describe and understand before attempting to judge or solve;

4. Balance criticism and support, and be honest;

5. Focus on issues and dilemmas, and move between specific instances and general principles.
A brief example

• Small primary school in small coastal Israeli town

• Staff with progressive educational approach, emphasize learning out of intrinsic motivation

• Encounter trouble coping with one “difficult” class

• Recruit a new teacher, experienced in a “behaviour analysis” approach

• Tension in the staff room over classroom management rules and their enforcement

• Joined a research project on post-observation professional conversations
“We get the case of the child vs. the curriculum; of the individual nature vs. social culture. Below all other divisions in pedagogic opinion lies this opposition.”
1) Most are listening to you: I'm not sure Meital was listening now, nor was Ben. Look, I’ll tell you – let's say, this part, when they stopped listening, what do you think about that?

2) I think that there will always be some children who listen, and other children who don’t.

3) Okay

4) It's important that those who are listening receive some kind of response. As for those who aren’t listening, we should try to interest them, to grab their attention. But we also need to let it go. They likely can't contain so much and it’s okay. You can't force them, so they...

5) I wanted to say – I mean, to suggest the other alternative, Noa's method, you know, “Eyes on me!” and there’s absolute silence in classroom.
6) Well, sometimes I do that. But sometimes I understand that they’ve had enough of me. They can’t listen to me anymore and that's all right.

7) Interesting.

8) They can’t all be – they’re not soldiers -- like, really. That’s what I think.

9) You’re saying that the pupil doesn't want to listen to you now.

10) No, and it’s okay, he'll cope with it. If he misses something, some information, he’ll know how to reach me.

11) Interesting, OK.

12) The whole class doesn’t have to be the same.
I do feel that children are able, from within themselves, to choose to listen. And not because I'm standing there, and telling them [knocks on table three times].

Cool, I – I understand, and it’s a lofty ambition..

It happens, yes. I can tell you about the process I went through with Noa. I mean with Noa’s approach. At first, it made my skin crawl. I couldn’t speak that language. I also don’t know how to say it in her words, OK?

And it happens.

I'm not Noa. I can’t say, "I praise you". I don’t like it, but, I have adopted aspects of it. Now, when I enter a class I know how to achieve attentiveness. “Now, everyone, Eyes on me! Sit straight!” It’s a bit coercive and extrinsic, Pavlovian as you call it.
6) But it serves my purposes and I don’t think it harms the kids much. I mean the proportion is important, as is the music. So I invite you to consider expanding [your repertoire].

7) Of course, I'm – especially because I'm a person of freedom, so I listen to other things.
Is this a good professional conversation?

0:45
Is this a good professional conversation?

1. Direct and honest coping with a “painful” pedagogical topic.
2. Grounded in actual classroom practice.
4. Issue and dilemma-focused, and considers the underlying principles.
5. Supportive and challenging.
6. Reciprocal.
Advancing teacher learning through professional conversations – What to do?

1. **Organization**: creating teams with a shared object, carving out time for regular meetings;

2. **Culture**: creation of productive discourse norms, through protocols, modeling, and reflection;

3. **Representation**: making practice available for inquiry, e.g. through video recordings, or documenting student work;

4. **Leadership**: facilitating teacher discourse requires a unique set of skills and dispositions.

5. **Systemic approach**: career trajectories, incentive structures, support systems.
Thank you!

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Rule #11 – Don’t let evidence interfere with ideological commitments

The prevalent argument structure:

a) Goal X is important (e.g. preventing racism is important);

b) The education system does not adequately advance Goal X (e.g. our schools do little to combat racism);

c) Evidence for this claim is that X is a problem (e.g. there is racism);

d) Therefore, the education system needs to advance Goal X (e.g. we must devote time and energy to combating racism in schools).
Rule #8 – Focus on what’s missing...

... rather than what is present (e.g. talk about what the teacher should have done rather than what actually happened).

- It’s missing corners
- And lacks straight lines
- Where’s the red color. It should be red.
(Expertise in teaching)

- **Sensitivity** to notice what’s happening;
- **Interpretation** to accurately make sense of what’s going on;
- **Repertoire** of strategies to act and respond flexibly;
- **Judgement** to choose the best course of action.