Exploring a moment of practice: a structured reflective conversation

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This short discussion and the accompanying diagram below together illustrate a structured conversation that we use at the University of Northampton to enable teachers and school leaders to explore the ways in which they define good teaching and the reasons why they define it in this way. It is used by us as a model on one masters’ module on reflective practice taught at the University of Northampton. However, we also also use it in other contexts in which we are working with teachers. We are also now evaluating its use as a model and expect to publish regarding this in 2018 and 2019.

To follow the structure of this conversation through, using the diagram presented below, start with the circle: as this illustrates, with this conversation, the teacher, school leader or whoever it may be is initially asked to describe ‘a moment of good practice’. This is a moment of their teaching or another short moment in their professional lives, no longer than one hour and often as short as a few minutes, in which they think their values and beliefs as to what good teaching is shine through very clearly. Colleagues using this approach have defined it as being a point in time which: ‘if they were to be observed by peers for just a few minutes of teaching is the one they would choose’. It is a moment of practice that they are proud of and that reflects them at their self-perceived best.

After describing this moment of practice, the teacher is asked to explain why they feel that this moment of practice demonstrates their definitions of good teaching most clearly (on the diagram this stage in the conversation is shown by the hexagon). This conversation although more extended than these examples, often reveals answers such as these, below. Both these quotations are from conversations that we have been given permission to use:

A history teacher describing a moment of practice they are proud of and why: ‘by using the card sort, and the conversations it generates, I get the sense that they are deeply involved in critical thinking. To me that is what history teaching is about.’

A dance teacher describing a moment of practice they are proud of and why: ‘I think at this point they are creating new dance, new art but with an understanding of these cultural conventions – new-ness and understanding of the depth that underpins dance, I think’.

Having accessed through this discussion the teacher’s values and beliefs about what good teaching is, the conversation then moves on to where these values and beliefs come from (on the diagram this is the rectangle) and to why they define good teaching in this way. These can at times be to do with childhood or student-hood experiences that they remember positively. They can also be about negative learning experiences that they do not want to repeat for their students, now that they are a teacher. Or equally they can relate to experiences as a trainee, to inspirational colleagues or to learning experiences entirely outside a formal setting.

Having together built a cognitive map of their values and beliefs about teaching, through the three stages of the conversation so far, only then is reference made to research literature (the triangle on the diagram). At this point the teacher is asked to design their own future reading map and think of ways by which they can find writings by others, who may share their values and perceptions regarding good teaching, and which might develop their understanding. This
is the final stage of the process, indicating that the teacher’s experiential expertise is clearly valued. Research literature is therefore implicitly presented as a distinct and useful way for the teacher to reach a deeper understanding of their own experiential knowledge rather than a challenge to it.

We find this model for structuring a conversation about teaching both affirming and engaging. Teachers we have worked with consistently feed-back positively. Within the masters’ module mentioned at the start of this short discussion, this model is used to support teachers to engage in an autoethnographic consideration of themselves as professionals. This is facilitated by the time-focused, jump off point, that they identify. As previously mentioned this is typically a moment or experience in which they feel distinctly, professionally competent and confident. That is not to indicate that less positive experiences are excluded from the process, but they are part of the critique which engagement with relevant literature allows, rather than the focus.

We believe, and our experience supports the view, that a positive starting point supports a more balanced process of critical reflection. In our experience teachers’ views on good teaching are revealed to be broad and balanced but very diverse. It is a strength of this model that it allows individuals to access their sometimes idiosyncratic approaches and to take them forward for exploration and critique. In future months we will be exploring the conversations this model generates more fully and will be presenting our findings in further publications.

*Diagram illustrating a conversation that enables teachers to explore how they define good teaching.*