2011

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Shaw, Peter and Cole, Bob, "Professional Conversations: A Reflective Framework for Collaborative Development" (2011). *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development*. 737.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/podimproveacad/737

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PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS

A REFLECTIVE FRAMEWORK FOR COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT

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A small team of faculty and faculty developers at the Monterey Institute of International Studies launched a professional development initiative by adapting Edge's (1992, 2002) framework of cooperative development into a model they labeled the professional conversation. This structured interaction involves a speaker exploring a topic of professional and personal significance through the facilitation of an understander. The details of the model are presented, along with heuristics for practicing the two roles. Assessment data indicate that the struggle to master the model is judged worthwhile for community building, professional development, and, unexpectedly, pedagogical practice.

Edge's (1992, 2002) cooperative development process was adapted, renamed the professional conversation, and implemented by a small team of faculty and faculty developers at the Monterey Institute of International Studies. We came quite rapidly to appreciate the powerful impact of the process and to see its value in resolving issues, including selecting the best of a number of possible research projects, solving assessment difficulties, and dealing with difficult students. From our reading of Edge and other sources, we expected positive outcomes. We were not prepared, however, for the direct and transformative transfer of the respect, empathy, sincerity, and humility generated in the professional conversation process to our teaching behaviors and interactions with colleagues.

Background

In order to situate our work, we first carefully distinguish professional conversation from other types of collegial interaction in the academy. Because professional conversation involves peers, it is not a form of mentoring, though we found value in comprehensive accounts of mentoring (Lottero-Perdue & Fifield, 2010; Neal & Peed-Neal, 2009), insightful case studies (Dailey-Hebert, Donnelli, & Mandernach, 2010), online tools (DiPietro et al., 2009), and team models (Gray & Birch, 2008). Similarly, we separate professional conversation from consulting (Jacobson, Wulff, Grooters, Edwards, & Freisem, 2009) and coaching (Blumberg, 2009; Glickman, 2002; Thomas, 1995; West & Staub, 2003). We view it as more like the small group-based professional development program that complemented the campus expedition approach of Carlson-Dakes and Pawley (2006), and the Spiritual Book Club, Breakfast for the Soul, and other initiatives (Qualters, Dolinsky, & Woodnick, 2009). Professional conversation shares the spirit of the seminar for exploring the inner landscape of teaching described by Jones (2005), where the sessions, with twelve to sixteen participants, were characterized by a "calm, slow" pace and an "open, honest and supportive" tone (p. 132).

In broader terms, ideas informing our general thinking around professional conversation come from a variety of sources; the notion of professional collaboration in education is, after all, nothing new. Particularly fundamental is the work of Rogers (1973) in establishing empathy as a necessary condition for facilitating personal development and its subsequent application (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994) to education. Freire (1970) describes liberation from the old models of education not as a gift or a self-achievement but as a mutual process. Education is a mutual, world-mediated process in which the participants become conscious of their incompletion. The transformation to a state of being more fully human is achieved by dialogics, which Freire presents as the essence of education and thereby the practice of freedom. Ferguson (1980) describes the process of personal transformation as developing the open and collaborative teacher who is fully attuned to all aspects of the educational context, having "a healthy level of self-esteem, little defensiveness, few ego needs" and being "willing to let go, to be wrong" (p. 293). Chomsky (2000) urges educators away from a "pedagogy of lies" toward (echoing Freire's phrase) a "pedagogy of hope." Gabriel (2005) calls for educational leaders to foster collaboration among teachers and describes how collaborators morph into partners in learning who are equally motivated to facilitate each other's development.

A second important background element in professional conversation is the significance of open dialogue and storytelling among educators. Postman (1995) discusses William James and his notion that there is nothing more human than telling the stories of our errors and how we have overcome them to reach new truths. Knowledge is not passed directly down, but is modified, refined, and enriched by conversation. Johannesen (1994) starts from Martin Buber's I-thou relationship, where participants in a dialogical interaction display a range of qualities from openheartedness and directness to a sense of responsibility for the other and a complete lack of interest in boosting their own ego. In discussing critique as signature pedagogy in the arts, Klebesadel and Kornetsky (2009) conclude that creating an effective learning community crucially involves developing a space featuring the free and open exchange of ideas. In each case—telling stories, exchanging ideas, offering critiques— the emphasis is on open sharing in order to understand and be understood.

Four Guiding Themes

In pursuit of our own understanding of such intentional collaboration within a learning community, four key themes emerged: empowerment, respect and empathy, humility, and mutuality.

Empowerment

The first theme is the liberating and empowering potential of professional conversations that we saw particularly in the work of bell hooks, who includes transcripts of conversations with educator and philosopher Ron Scapp in *Teaching Community* (2003). Scapp expresses the basic position in this way: "The practice of critical thinking requires that we all engage in some degree of critical evaluation of self and other. . . . It helps if we can engage individuals in ways that promote self-motivated interrogation rather than reactive response to outer challenge" (p. 107). hooks responds: "Our dialogues together stimulate us. They lead us back to the drawing board and help us strengthen ideas. We have continued to support each other as friends, as colleagues, crossing the boundaries of race, gender, and status. . . . You and I together strengthened the bonds of personal closeness and professional solidarity by always maintaining a space where we listen to one another when the other is raising critical questions" (pp. 111–112). It was essential for us to remember that such "self-motivated interrogation" can take place only in an appropriately safe and meaningful space.

Respect and Empathy

Given the conditions hooks described, the second theme to emerge in our work was the role of respect and empathy in professional interactions. Makau and Marty (2001) describe the need for empathetic and respectful exchanges in the academy as the basis for effective decision making and the quality of human life. Respectful listening and compassionate responses underlie constructive deliberation, leading to a definition of *dialogue* as "a process of communicating with (rather than at, to, or for) others and the sharing of a mutual commitment to hear and be heard" (p. 46). Philosopher Martha Nussbaum coined the phrase "narrative imagination" to characterize complex imaginative abilities required for moral interaction with others. Among these abilities is the capacity to imagine the experience of others so deeply that we are able to empathize with them and experience true compassion for them. She speaks of the capacity to "imagine what it is like" to be in someone else's place and the "ability to stand back and ask whether the person's own judgment has taken the full measure of what has happened" in any given set of circumstances (1997, p. 91). Our understanding of empathy was further informed by Pink's (2005) urging for a more right-brain approach to solving problems. He defines *empathy* as an instinctive, spontaneous act of putting oneself in another's position—"a stunning act of imaginative derring-do, the ultimate virtual reality—climbing into another's mind to experience the world from that person's perspective" (p. 159). We thus recognize that an effective participant in the professional conversation must combine empathy and respect with a strong dose of imagination.

Humility

Palmer (1993) discusses humility as both a classic spiritual virtue and an epistemological virtue. He defines *humility* as "the virtue that allows us to pay attention to 'the other'—be it student or subject—whose integrity and voice are so central to knowing and teaching in truth" (p. 108). Palmer acknowledges the clarity of Karl Deutsch's (1966) writing on humility as "an attitude towards facts and messages outside oneself . . . openness to experience as well as criticism . . . a sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs and desires of others" (p. 230). Palmer links humility with teaching in the following way: "It takes humility for a teacher to create and sustain silence, a silence in which we withhold the instant answer so the question can be really heard. The teacher who lacks humility will be unable to create a space for any voice except his or her own. . . . In humility we allow ourselves to know and be known in relationship, and

in that allowing we draw our students into the community of truth" (Palmer, p. 109). We found this notion of humility important as a reminder to the understander (who is inspired by the call for empathetic imagination) of the constant need for restraint, self-monitoring, and the mindful suppression of advice and critical commentary.

Mutuality

Mutuality is at the heart of professional conversations. One of Fullan's (2008) six secrets of change is "connecting peers with purpose," which is described in educational terms as "social and intellectual glue" (p. 47) at a variety of levels: teachers learn from each other in professional learning communities; schools learn from each other; school districts learn from each other in "lateral capacity building." Although the informing and modifying of pedagogical practice was not the primary concern of our group, we describe how the flow of insight and energy into teaching practice was fairly immediate and had a high impact.

Edge's Cooperative Development

Edge's model is a proven framework of professional self-development through cooperation with colleagues. Edge (1992) makes the case that self-development cannot be done in isolation; rather, through cooperation with colleagues, we can understand more deeply our own experiences and ways of thinking. It is important, however, that our collaborators are not invested in changing or persuading us so that our thinking and practice more closely approximate theirs. The collaborator does not offer advice or recommendations. The aim is to help the colleague through the process, keeping the development in the speaker's own hands. Cooperative development is thus "a mixture of awareness-raising and disciplined cooperation" (Edge, 1992, p. 4). In refining the model, Edge (2002) characterizes the locus of the work as "the space between our common humanity and our individual, contextualized differences that constitutes the territory of our potential development as teachers. It is exactly this space that I want to explore. It's a big country" (p. 6).

   The model involves two participants: the speaker and the understander. The former learns by speaking: that is, she selects an issue, problem, or challenge and sets out to learn more about it by putting together thoughts sufficiently coherent for someone else to understand them. The understander has a very constrained role within the discourse framework. Since the core of cooperative development is an agreement for the two to

work together according to mutually agreed rules, the understander must follow the contract closely, deliberately making as much space as possible for the speaker by withholding his suggestions, advice, and commentary. The understander role, however, is not passive: it involves actively working to help the speaker to use this space creatively. Edge (2002) notes: "The collaborating colleague's entire purpose is to understand in a deep and rich sense . . . because of the growth that can arise from the experience from being understood" (p. 25).

To clarify the nature of cooperative development discourse, Edge outlines three macrophases—exploration, discovery, and action—each with three possible components (Table 9.1). The result is what Randall and Thornton (2001) call "nine ways of interacting which are important for encouraging and nurturing collaborative development" (p. 62), developing interpersonal skills and promoting empathetic and respectful attitudes and behaviors

Table 9.1 Cooperative Development Discourse Phases

Macrophase	Components	Characterization of Roles
Exploration	Attending	Making the speaker (S) feel well listened to; understander (U) pays close attention with nonjudgmental acceptance
	Reflecting	U is a "warm, human mirror," reflecting back meanings at all levels to check comprehension
	Focusing	U helps S review aspects of topic and identify the central issue
Discovery	Thematizing	U brings together two or more of S's ideas to see if they are related; S may or may not accept the connection
	Challenging	U asks S to reconcile two or more statements that seem to conflict
	Disclosing	Within S's frame of reference, U discloses his or her own experience as a point of comparison

(Continued)

	Table 9.1 *(Continued)*	
Action	Goal setting	U nudges S toward action by asking what goals might be set
	Trialing	U helps S describe a plan to reach the goal with clear and organized steps
	Planning	The most practical step, including arrangements for the next conversation

Our Process

The group whose work we describe here emerged from a chance conversation between two faculty members from different academic programs about talking less in class. After making contact with the campus faculty development group, the Teaching and Learning Collaborative, an informal group formed around discussions of Finkel's (2000) book, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*. There was great interest from other faculty once news spread that a group had formed to discuss learning- and student-centric teaching strategies. The original group of six expanded to a mixed group of students and faculty numbering more than twenty. This quickly proved to be unmanageable; we learned that scalability presents dynamic challenges to teaching and learning communities. With a smaller group, norms and expectations can be discussed and shared reasonably, while with the larger group, it became much more difficult to attend to everyone. The following semester we fell back to a purposefully small teaching and learning community to explore the Edge model, an approach that we had identified as fundamentally transformative given that it is based on a role-based discourse framework that requires participants to reframe professional development as purposeful reflection. This community consisted of three full-time faculty members and three faculty developers who also maintained regular teaching assignments.

Our amended version of the process (Table 9.2) has emerged directly from our own experiences. From recording, transcribing, and analyzing speaker-understander sessions, we found evidence for four phases rather than three. In particular, we found the need to identify the purpose of the first phase as acknowledging the speaker-understander space and launching the topic, with focusing moved into phase 2. In order to facilitate the role of the understander within our group, we modified Edge's original stages of cooperative development into four main phases, each representing a couple of possible moves. Our modifications reflect our shared

Table 9.2 The Professional Conversation Framework

Macrophase	Components	Characterization of Roles	Outcomes
1. Establishing mutual attention	Attending	Understander (U) and speaker (S) acknowledge roles and purpose in the conversation; S sees that U is listening with close attention and respect	S feels comfortable, respected, and listened to, and is willing to disclose issue
	Reflecting	S presents issue; U helps S to define limits of the topic under consideration	S and U are clear about the topic or nature of the issue
2. Mapping the topic	Focusing	U guides S to narrow and refine topic scope, identifying key elements	Topic boundaries are defined and key elements articulated for mutual reference
	Connecting and relating	Meaningful connections emerge for S	Relationships between key elements form
3. Exploring the topic	Reconciling	U presents points of perceived disconnect or vagueness; S resolves to achieve maximum clarity	Inconsistencies presented by S are addressed and resolved
	Speculating	U points to possible solutions or actions already mentioned; S contemplates	Solutions become visible and their potential is explored
4. Making a plan	Goal setting	S identifies desired outcomes; U seeks clarity and priority	S is satisfied with relevance of the goal and ready to consider next steps
	Planning action	S identifies actionable steps; U is encouraging	S gains confidence to undertake plan for action
	Appreciating	S and U reflect appreciatively	Both participants recognize the value of their roles in the cooperative development process

appreciation for the reinforcing and mutual nature of the speaker-understander relationship in jointly working through unexplored issues, dilemmas, and questions.

While Table 9.2 captures our group's experiences with Edge's original framework and our subsequent revisions, it is important to emphasize that the speaker-understander interaction is far from linear. At first the process may feel somewhat formulaic, but the fluid, intuitive nature of the process emerges through repeated practice and reflection. As we continued to discuss our own practice during our weekly meetings, other metaphors and visualizations (fluid layers, a spiral staircase, a garden walk, a tango) were suggested as a means of illustrating the dynamic, reflective pathways available within the revised framework. Figure 9.1 offers one such visualization, highlighting mutual attention as a constant while the understander intentionally helps the speaker to map, explore, and eventually plan action. To further enhance our ability to practice

Figure 9.1 Visualization of the Emended Professional Conversation
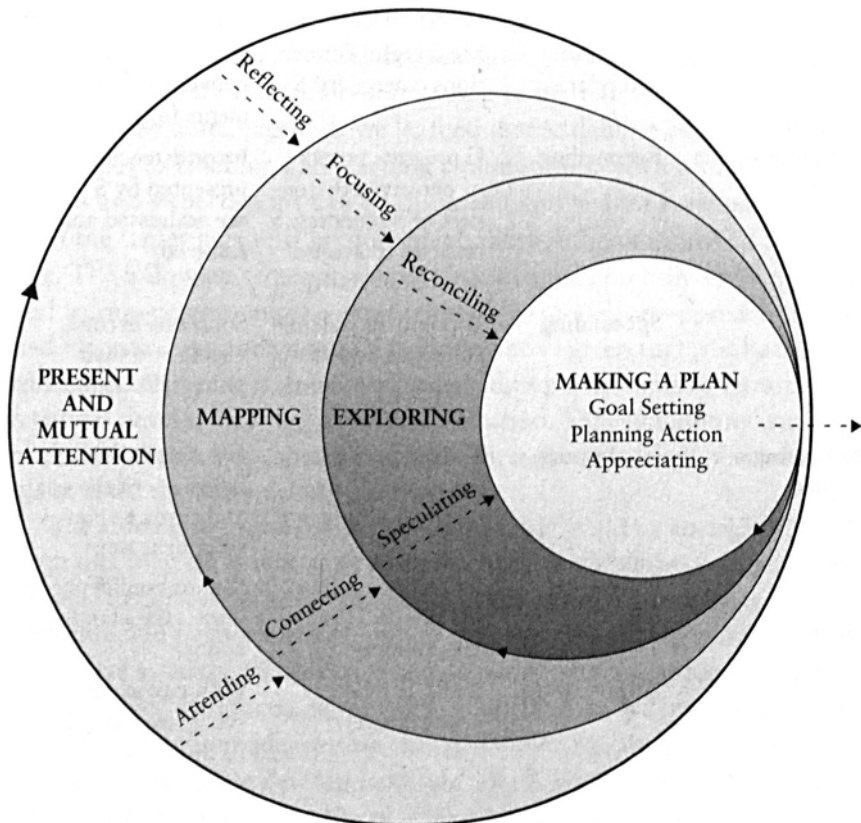
the understander's role as a guide we created a heuristic (Table 9.3) for the understander to have available as a prompt.

To contextualize further the revised framework, we present an extract from a twenty-minute speaker-understander conversation between two faculty colleagues. In the first phase (attending, reflecting), the speaker, Maria (not her real name), talks about her "troubled writing class." She describes the challenge of her mixed-level class, articulating her frustrations with a group of higher-level students who, she feels, are taking advantage of her and not completing course assignments. In the second phase (focusing, relating), Maria's understander, Jake, prompts her to summarize how she has responded to the confusing behavior of this group of students. She explains that the issue is not simply a conflict of personalities or her lack of clarity in her course design or communication:

Table 9.3 The Understander's Quick Reference Guide

Macrophase	Component	Understander Cues
1. Presence and mutual attention	Attending	I am actively and supportively listening to you.
	Reflecting	If I understand you correctly, you think . . .
2. Mapping the topic	Focusing	What is the most important aspect? What do you want to concentrate on? What is your underlying assumption about this?
	Connecting and relating	Do you think there is a connection between A and B?
3. Exploring the topic	Reconciling	How does that fit with what you said about X?
	Speculating	I am wondering . . .
4. Making a plan	Goal setting	So what might be the takeaway here? What would it take to move forward?
	Planning action	So how might you go about this?
	Appreciating	I really appreciate your . . .

"This feels different in a way that I feel that I've been so clear in explaining what we're doing and in trying to be extraordinarily supportive to them, that I guess that's where I see the frustration, I'm confused as to why, why the expectations are so out of balance." As Maria and Jake continue, she considers how accommodating she should be given the conflicting attitudes, diverse learning needs, and preestablished course requirements. We join their interaction in phase 3 (exploring) as Jake helps Maria try to reconcile her frustration with the direct stance she has taken with these students:

Jake: So it's possible that some of this intense discomfort results from your being moved away from where you would normally be in your roles as a teacher, in the ways that you would behave, to another place that is not where you want to be?

Maria: Yeah—

Jake: That's not Maria the—

Maria: And it's not necessarily the type of, I mean I like the clarity. Sometimes I hear myself saying sentences to them and I'm like "hmm?" (laughter) Interesting because it's so clear and so direct and so just, there's no ambiguity in it.

Jake: Mm-hmm. (nodding)

Maria: That, yeah, I think that is what it is, but I don't necessarily think that that's the best teacher. I mean I don't think that's necessarily the best approach. I mean I—I don't know, that's up for debate but, um, yeah, I don't think it's necessarily how I see myself as a teacher.

Jake: But clearly there's something there in the complex Maria makeup (laughter) that is also the professional who is not going to be pushed around by rude people.

Maria: Yeah, I mean I, yeah. (nodding)

Jake: And you're obviously prepared to go there when it's necessary.

Maria: Mm-hmm, yeah, I think so, it's just hard to go there. (nervous laughter)

Jake: And would it, do you think it would ever get any easier? I mean if you were forced to go there again in the future?

As the conversation enters phase 4 (planning action), Maria expresses a sense of resolve in her flexible yet uncompromising approach to working with the difficult group of students. While she expresses discomfort in having to take on the role of rule enforcer, a renewed voice

of confidence emerges: "You know, like, I'm here to work with you [the students] on these things but, one, you have to do my assignments as much as you would do another assignment and, two, you have to, you can't just also, at two in the morning just e-mail me." In this way, Maria takes away from the session a thoughtfully considered plan to resolve the classroom issue and, beyond that, has gained valuable insights for her practice.

Practicing the Roles

As we came to grips with the speaker-understander model and our emerging version of the professional conversation, we created a repertoire of procedures for rehearsing and becoming more comfortable with the roles:

- Pairs of participants rehearsing in private
- Pairs of participants rehearsing in public, with feedback from the other four
- The group watching and critiquing a recorded professional conversation
- The dummy understander: one participant is the speaker and one the understander, but the latter participates only when prompted by the four observers, who are thus making joint decisions about when and how to intervene
- Using a videorecorded conversation and pausing each time the understander was about to speak in order to predict what would be most appropriate to say
- Creating laminated cards with the sequence shown in Table 9.3, with the cards used by understanders as a heuristic reference

Conclusion

In a focus group format, participants discussed positive aspects of their experiences with the professional conversation framework and their reservations to date. They identified these aspects as the most prominent:

- The small scale was greatly valued in terms of both the size of the community (six) and the self-contained nature of the conversations.
- The small scale has proved a manageable way of meeting multiple goals and needs.

- The process itself has become a valuable outcome as we have learned to really listen to each other; this is always useful, even when there is no immediate outcome. Simply framing an issue fully leads to significant reflection, which leads to better understanding the world around us, to putting things into context through personal exploration.

- Because the model creates a space for exploration, there is both a mental transformation as we gain clarity in our thinking process and a personal transformation that combines heart and mind. Truly attending (including to oneself) is a difficult process, but one we have found helpful. "Being clear to myself" is a crucial outcome.

- As teachers, the model has led us away from focusing on ourselves to pedagogical developments and a much better connection with students. As one participant put it, "The ego goes away, leaving real communication with the students and with the material." This new humility leads to a more student-centered approach: "We can allow greater energy to flow through us rather than trying to capture it." This pedagogical infusion has been extended to our graduate teacher training programs, where students learn PC procedures as they develop their own reflective practice through a teaching practicum.

- The lack of hierarchy and the resulting depth of collegiality permit risk taking. Using Edge's phrase, which captures the excitement and the fear implicit in the first few experiences with the model, we found we could put ourselves on "the crumbling edge of our understanding."

- The group appreciated the symmetry between the understander role and our institutional approach to cross-cultural issues in development. That is, the value for the speaker (or client) is greater because no advice is given; rather, a fruitful process of reflection and planning is facilitated.

The group's reservations about the model centered initially on the discomfort of the somewhat therapeutic feel of the interaction. The process seemed overly personal (the phrase *touchy-feely* was used more than once), and we had to confront the challenge of locating the zone between the personal and the professional where the real work gets done. The second issue of concern was finding the appropriate means of dissemination, that is, broadening the project to become more inclusive. Because of the

recognized value of the small scale, the next stages have been approached with caution. The original group continues to hone its practice and also work individually with interested colleagues. In short, the process of overcoming the initial awkwardness of the model and mastering the two roles was not easy, but it nevertheless has been judged worthwhile in terms of professional development, community building, and, somewhat unexpectedly, pedagogical practice.

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