

Book Review

Jarvis, J. and Clark, K. (eds.) (2020) *Conversations to Change Teaching*. St Albans: Critical Publishing

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Fundamentally this book does what it says on the tin – it is about how conversations can be used as a tool to change teaching. The authors' definition of conversation incorporated critical reflection, research, mutual learning and coaching. The authors aimed to show how this approach to conversation can be used at all levels:

“We argue that conversation is an essential activity for both individual and institutional well-being and effectiveness. It is a powerful, underappreciated and often unexplored tool within the reach of all.”
(p.1).

Interestingly, in their acknowledgements, the authors thanked one of the book proposal reviewers who commented that there was

“no point in writing this book, as no one has time for conversations in universities any more.”
(p.ii)

Based on this feedback, they stated their intention to keep their content realistic within the context of busy working lives, and to integrate their suggestions for conversations about teaching into regular activities, such as peer observation. Indeed this slim volume (79 pages) lends itself to the busy academic – it is to the point, broken down into short sections with clear headings, illuminated by concise case studies, and consistently structured. Each chapter ends with some thought provoking questions which encourage the reader to engage with the material they have just read, and an annotated reading list, neatly illustrating a conversational approach to learning.

Chapter one highlighted the importance of conversation and elaborated the concept. We are talking about more than planning the timetable and allocating rooms here – the focus was on the nature of student learning, challenging our assumptions and values, and questioning our practice. Conversations within and outside our own discipline, and with our students, are all pertinent. While such an inquiry stance at an individual level might be commended, asking questions such as “Are our approaches aligned with our values and purposes” (p.6) at an institutional level can be disruptive, but at the same time could lead to lasting improvement.

The subsequent chapters explored opportunities for engaging in conversation about teaching and how to maximise them. Chapter two, on peer observation of teaching, was particularly valuable. In general, even the busiest of staff will have their teaching observed, and hence the guidance in this chapter should be widely applicable. While the approach to peer observation outlined is likely to be broadly familiar, the reminder that this process is about shared learning and not passing judgement was particularly apt. A useful table contrasted the role of peer observer with that of bake-off judge, with statements such as: "I need to be explicit about what I think is good and bad" juxtaposed with "I need to enable my colleague to identify and reflect on aspects of teaching and learning" (p.15). The guidance was further illuminated by case studies which illustrated each stage in the process.

Chapter three explored how to approach a conversation about teaching, including identifying topics and using coaching strategies. Some opportunities for conversations were suggested, including "matchmaking" critical friendships across the institution, and using opportunities for co-teaching. This was taken further in chapter four, which explained the setting up of conversation groups to discuss teaching, substantiated by excellent case studies. Chapter five focused on engaging students in conversations about learning and teaching, starting with some brief case studies and then providing an extended example of the authors' own practice in an innovative project, setting up cross-institutional staff-student groups. After the opening which had indicated a focus on realistic approaches for busy academic staff, I was starting to question the direction the book was taking. However, there were some pertinent time saving suggestions, for example in chapter three there was a short discussion on integrating learning conversations into the routine business of universities, such as programme review. Meanwhile, in chapter five a brief mention was made of involving students in institutional processes around learning and teaching in a non-tokenistic way. There may have been scope to further emphasise these potentially more sustainable approaches. Nevertheless, the examples of aspirational and transformative projects provided valuable material, and perhaps it is up to the reader to select and adapt what might work within their own context.

Chapter six examined how to approach conversations about the assessment of teaching. Flattening unequal power relationships was a theme throughout the book, and it was highly relevant here. This chapter would be particularly helpful to prepare an assessor to deal with potentially challenging conversations, for example focusing on teacher competency or following a less-than-exemplary teaching observation. Finally, chapter seven explored strategies to lead and foster conversations about teaching across the institution, which did go some way to address my earlier misgivings about realism.

In terms of audience, the authors assert:

"This book is designed both for colleagues with all levels of experience who are leading their own learning in teaching, and for those who aim to lead the professional learning of others."
(p.7)

I would take this further and suggest that the chapter on peer observation of teaching should be required reading for all engaged in the observation process. Moreover, some of the potentially transformational approaches suggested would work better with support from departmental and institutional managers, both in terms of adjusting workloads and

responding to new ideas, so they should also be encouraged to read it. The book does work well as a cover-to-cover read, but for the dipper, I would particularly recommend chapters two (peer observation), five (engaging with students) and six (dealing with awkward conversations).

Overall, I felt that this was an excellent book, modelling a coaching-based approach to promoting shared learning about teaching, illuminated throughout by case studies and anecdotes, from wide research and from the authors' own practice. Engaging with students as part of this conversation was particularly significant. The range of scenarios examined was comprehensive, nonetheless, bearing in mind the impact of Coronavirus since this book was published in early 2020, maybe a future edition could address the issues around organising these conversations online – potentially opening them up to a wider audience.

In the interests of flattening unequal power relationships, I will give the final word to the authors, who ended their book with the following rallying cry:

“Education effects change in lives and societies; that is why it is important to build change in teaching one conversation at a time.”
(p.77)