

Implementing professional learning conversations

A conversational approach to developing academic leadership capacity

Kylie Readman, Jennifer Rowe and Katharina Franke

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A conversational approach to developing academic leadership capacity in learning and teaching

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A Good practice guide

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Foreword

Being a successful university academic requires a very diverse skillset. For early career academic staff, appropriate mentoring and guidance as to how they might develop their teaching capability, direct their research, and plan their engagement with the community can be of tremendous benefit. As their careers become established, ambitious academic staff will be looking for opportunities where they can demonstrate leadership. Universities interested in retaining high-calibre academic staff have a responsibility to offer such opportunities to emerging leaders.

In 2013, senior staff at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) received an Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) Extension Grant, *Professional Learning Conversations for Academic Leadership*, to trial an innovative approach to developing learning and teaching leadership by utilising professional learning conversations with a group of emerging leaders. The grant and conversations were framed around a previous OLT grant, also involving staff from USC, which produced the *Handbook for executive leaders of learning and teaching*. The professional learning conversations invited emerging leaders to consider the advice from executive leaders and think about how that advice might be relevant for them.

The project achieved three main goals. It supported and developed leadership in learning and teaching for emerging leaders; it prepared emerging leaders for the future by enabling them to engage with a principles-focused leadership program; and it produced and tested a professional learning conversation protocol, which is described in this publication. Professional learning conversations facilitate conceptual change, in this case about learning and teaching leadership. The conversational approach draws on the knowledge and experience within the group as a basis for collaborative learning.

For the participants, the professional learning conversations were significant. The emerging leaders group have reported an increased understanding of the

work of colleagues in other schools which has resulted in the development of collaborative relationships and a number of joint projects, some funded by internal grants and the OLT. The project succeeded in giving a voice to a new generation of academics as they established relationships with senior leaders. The program gave the participants increased recognition, which led to an improved sense of agency and confidence in their ability to contribute to the university.

This handbook, *Implementing professional learning conversations*, is an outcome of the project. Facilitators can use it to guide a group through the *Handbook for executive leadership of learning and teaching in higher education*, as was done in this instance. The protocol itself will be widely applicable to a range of topics and could readily use a different stimulus pre-text, depending on the set objectives.

This handbook is a reminder of the importance of providing high-quality professional development opportunities to staff. I would like to congratulate the authors, Kylie Readman, Associate Professor Jennifer Rowe and Katharina Franke, as well as the other OLT project leaders, Dr Maria Raciti and Jenny Nemeth.

Professor Birgit Lohmann

Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of the Sunshine Coast

Acknowledgments

This project was made possible through an Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching Extension Grant and the sponsorship and support of University of the Sunshine Coast Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Birgit Lohmann.

The project was successful in large part because of the participants. We would like to acknowledge and thank the twenty-one academic staff from the University of the Sunshine Coast who were noted for their contributions to their local academic units, were selected by their supervisors, and then participated in the conversation series with such commitment and enthusiasm. They were Renee Barnes, Harriot Beazley, Steven Boyd, Kelly Chambers, Sam Edwards, Shireen Fahey, Ann Framp, Wayne Graham, Michelle Gray, Anita Hamilton, Amanda Henderson, Tina Lathouras, Jo Loth, Terry Lucke, Greg Nash, Florin Oprescu, Sue Simon, Nick Stevens, Retha Scheepers, Jane Taylor and Uwe Terton.

The opportunity for these emerging academic leaders to engage with essential concepts in the contemporary higher education environment, share their experiences, reflect and develop new understandings of leadership was facilitated by the participation in the conversation series of a number of senior academics who took the time to share their vision and ideas, journey and wisdom. Our thanks go to Professor Greg Hill, Vice-Chancellor and President, USC; Professor Craig McInnis, a Director of PhilipsKPA; Mr Don Maconachie, Director of the USC Executive Projects Unit; Professor Birgit Lohmann, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, USC; Executive Deans of USC faculties, Professor Joanne Scott and Professor John Bartlett; Associate Professor Margaret Barnes, Head of School of Nursing and Midwifery; and Mr Mark Nugent, Director, Human Resources.

The conversation series was further enriched through the participation of four USC students who took part in a panel conversation. They were Anne Cameron,

Gillian Gardiner, Damon Grimwood and Alistair Bartholomew. They represent the rich diversity of the student population and demonstrate the many ways students engage in a university community, not only through their studies but also through peer mentoring and taking part in developments in the university in a range of forums and committees. We thank them for sharing their experience.

Dr Maria Raciti and Ms Jenny Nemeth completed the project team, and we extend our thanks to them for their commitment and willingness to facilitate conversations, reflect on their experience and learning, and support the operation of the program in numerous other ways. A good project manager is also crucial to success and we would like to thank Mr John Simpson for his excellent management of the project.

A number of skilled people have also contributed to the program, including the production of resources. We would specifically like to thank Ms Sondra Smit who produced the film resources and recorded each conversation, and Ms Priscilla Trahar who designed and facilitated the project's online community and resources. Dr Katharina Franke has worked tirelessly since the end of the project to collate, synthesise and produce this guidebook and the online resources.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Professional Learning Conversations for Academic Leadership project at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) commenced in mid-2013, with funding provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) through an Extension Grant. The project became colloquially known as the Emerging Leaders project; henceforth referred to as such in this guide.

Developing academic leaders effectively is a key aspect of advancing learning and teaching across higher education. Leadership in this area, whilst sharing some commonalities with other leadership domains, requires an in-depth knowledge of a range of topics specific to learning and teaching such as curriculum and assessment design, the student experience, and learning theory. As the higher education environment changes, learning and teaching leadership development will only become more crucial to the ongoing success of universities.

Some time ago, Ramsden (1998, p.4) stated that leadership in higher education was

“a practical and everyday process of supporting, managing, developing and inspiring academic colleagues ... leadership in universities can and should be exercised by everyone, from the Vice-Chancellor to the casual car parking attendant. Leadership is to do with how people relate to each other.”

Ramsden’s definition eschews the need for title and position to lead and identifies the criticality of a relational approach.

Distributed Leadership

A leadership approach that promotes an open culture and encourages collaboration at all levels across an institution.

Universities are highly distributed workplaces. Working in a learning and teaching leadership role therefore demands a distributed approach to leadership. **Distributed leadership** provides an alternative way to work within hierarchical structures that exist in most universities, and places the activities and interactions of leadership, rather than the individual leader, at the centre.

USC identified a need for increased leadership capacity and workforce planning to meet this need. In considering how to approach this task, and with the knowledge of distributed leadership drawn from other key OLT grants (e.g. Jones, Lefoe, Harvey & Hadgraft, 2011), a number of assumptions were made:

- The program would not focus on the transactional tasks;
- The program would be specific to higher education and focus on learning and teaching leadership;
- “Can do” would be demonstrated throughout the program;
- Connections between emerging and **executive leaders** would be developed; and
- **Emerging leaders** would be able to form a distributed network throughout the university if the relational aspects were attended to effectively.

Executive Leaders

A formal position with university-wide leadership responsibilities at the executive levels.

The purpose of the Emerging Leaders project was therefore to develop leadership of learning and teaching at the university, with a number of staff members identified as emerging leaders of learning and teaching. Given the assumptions above, the goals of the professional learning experience, and the needs of participants, a conversational approach was adopted. Instrumental to this approach was Earl and Timperley’s (2009) concept of *professional learning conversations* in order to explore what leadership means for emerging academic leaders in higher education and, more specifically, with regard to learning and teaching practices.

Emerging Leaders

Early career academic staff who have demonstrated local level leadership in learning and teaching.

The leadership program was thus structured as a conversation series involving six professional learning conversations that were based on the five leadership principles for action from the *Handbook for executive leadership of learning and teaching in higher education* (McInnis, Ramsden & Maconachie, 2012). The five principles drew on research and case studies that focus on what university leaders do to foster excellence in learning and teaching.

It is important here to distinguish between the broader Emerging Leaders project and the more discreet academic leadership program (conversation series) that formed the central element of the project. The structure of the Emerging Leaders project is conceptualised in Figure 1.

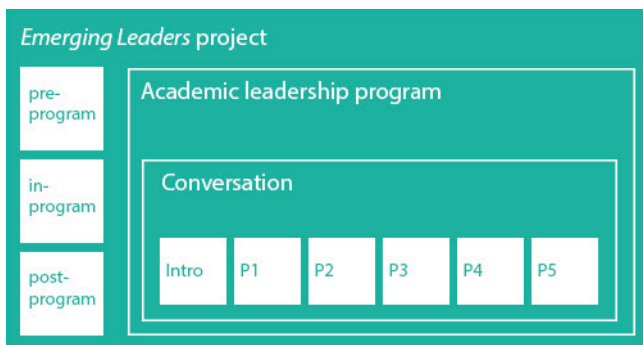


Figure 1: Structure of the Emerging Leaders project.

AIMS AND DELIVERABLES

Both the broader Emerging Leaders project and the academic leadership program were developed with specific objectives and outcomes in mind.

The **key deliverables** for the overall project included:

- A facilitation tool, the **professional learning conversation protocol**, to develop academic leadership for learning and teaching;

- A *Good practice guide* that exemplifies the principles and framework adopted for the project, provides practical examples and reflections, and serves as a learning tool for those wanting to implement a conversational approach for developing leadership or similar topics; and
- An *Online resource package* that complements the *Good practice guide*, is made available publicly for the higher education community, and provides resources developed during the conversation series.

The **objectives** for the academic leadership program focused more specifically on:

- Supporting and developing academic leadership in learning and teaching;
- Preparing academic leaders for the future by enabling them to engage with a principles-focused leadership program; and
- Engaging in professional learning conversations to facilitate conceptual change, that is, what does it mean to be an academic leader in learning and teaching.

The *Good practice guide* and the *Online resource package* are intended for higher education institutions and similar organisations that wish to explore conversational approaches to academic leadership or related topics.

PURPOSE OF THE GOOD PRACTICE GUIDE

The *Good practice guide* provides a practical framework for developing academic leadership in learning and teaching by drawing on the concept of professional learning conversations.

By implementing a conversational approach, institutions will be able to draw on existing skills, experience and knowledge of participants embedded in actual practice, thus creating a “safe space” for examining real issues. Professional learning conversations also lend

themselves to situating experiences in a theoretical context. Such a framework may then lead to opportunities for re-interpreting and reflecting experiences back to the individual participants in new ways.

Part 2 briefly explores the concept of professional learning conversations and provides some theoretical foundations. Part 3 provides a set of guidelines and recommendations on how to implement conversation protocols for leadership development or similar topics within higher education. Also included here is a sample protocol, as well as various lessons learned from the Emerging Leaders project at USC.

Part 4 illustrates how a conversational approach to leadership development can be set up, with USC as an example. Program artefacts and selected sample resources can be found in Part 5.

2 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

CONVERSATIONS

WHAT ARE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CONVERSATIONS?

Professional learning conversations are facilitated conversations that allow participants to engage in a series of discussions about interconnected topics. They use inquiry methods, evidence and reflection to inform the discussion, draw on prior knowledge, develop relationships, create mutual understanding through collaborative practices, and offer constructive feedback. In this context, established protocols play a vital role in aiding participants to have constructive and outcomes-oriented professional learning conversations that create “new ideas, tools and practices” (Earl & Timperley, 2009, p.2) and where “initial knowledge is either substantially enriched or transformed during the process” (p.2).

Accordingly, Earl and Timperley (2009, p.10) state that “[t]he basis of learning conversations is the mutual understanding of each contributor’s claims and the values, together with the reasoning and data on which they are based.” A key aspect of professional learning conversations is thus being evidence informed.

Evidence-informed conversations are primarily characterised by an “iterative process of asking questions, examining evidence and thinking about what the evidence means in the particular context” (Earl & Timperley, 2009, p.3). To effect evidence-informed change and engage in professional learning conversations, Earl and Timperley

(2009, p.3) suggest that professional learning conversations need to be underpinned by three key aspects (Figure 2):

- Adopting an **inquiry habit of mind**;
- Considering **relevant data and artefacts**; and
- Developing relationships of **respect and challenge**.

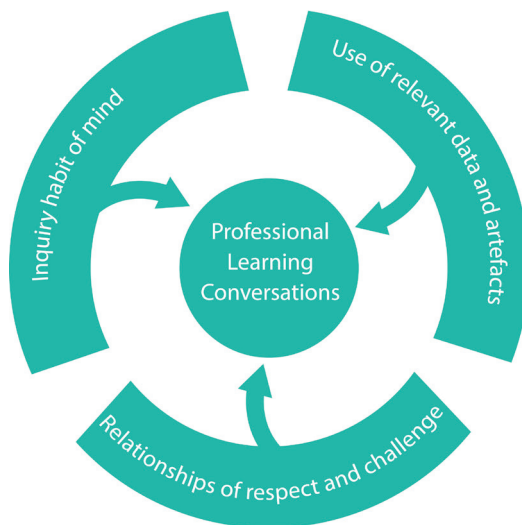


Figure 2: Evidence-informed conversations (adapted from Earl & Timperley, 2009, p.3).

Inquiry habit of mind

Leaders with an inquiry habit of mind do not presume an outcome; instead they allow for a range of outcomes and keep searching for increased understanding and clarity. Inquiry-mindedness demands engagement in questioning, reflecting and decision-making, using data as a critical element in the process.

Earl & Timperley (2009, p.5)

Inquiry-mindedness is critical for effective decision-making, leadership and “a belief that improvements occur through engaging with the ideas of others and the evidence on which these ideas are based” (Earl

& Timperley, 2009, p.5). It is premised on the notion that decision-making tends to involve a certain amount of guessing and the ability to tolerate ambiguity or uncertainty until deeper understanding based on evidence can be achieved.

Differences in opinion or perspectives, or uncertainty, are thus not considered problematic as such but as “having the potential to increase the quality of ideas and information” (Earl & Timperley, 2009, p.5).

Use of relevant data and artefacts

In addition to adopting a habit of inquiry-mindedness, professional learning conversations are characterised by utilising appropriate evidence, data and artefacts for enriching and shaping the discussion. As Earl and Timperley (2009, p.8) contend, “[l]eaders must be able to discern between legitimate evidence and evidence that is suspect” by (a) becoming knowledgeable about the quality of evidence presented and (b) engaging in discussion about the appropriate interpretation of the data and artefacts.

In professional learning conversations, evidence may come in the form of pre-texts or stimulus materials, for example, resources made available prior to a conversation to provoke participants’ thinking. Evidence may also come through the conversation itself, for example, by inviting a speaker who perhaps shares a strong message, presents compelling data, encourages participants to reflect on current practices, or invites them to critically examine beliefs and existing knowledge.

Relationships of respect and challenge

Professional learning conversations revolve around developing relationships of mutual respect and understanding whilst also being able to challenge and question each other. Showing respect should not be confined to giving equal airtime to opinions or ideas; it also includes effectively and constructively understanding and challenging

each other's viewpoints and underlying assumptions (Earl & Timperley, 2009, p.10).

Whilst, amongst other things, the facilitator's role is to encourage participants to reflect on the *why* — and occasionally to probe deeper into their experiences and thoughts — they need to be mindful of creating an atmosphere that is conducive to sharing and develops relationships of mutual trust amongst participants.

As a creative process, collaboration requires a high tolerance for open spaces, advanced skills in uncertainty, a hunger for the question, and a commitment to surpass what is routine.

Thomson (2003, p.120)

When professional learning conversations involve participants from wide-ranging backgrounds, they can act as a catalyst for participants to develop relationships they may not have had opportunity to develop otherwise.

The key elements of professional learning conversations are summarised below:

- Oriented to problems of professional practice;
- Inquiry-focused;
- Encourage relationship development between participants;
- Use evidence and data in the form of interactive artefacts and shared experiences (as emerging during discussion and reflection);
- Have formal structures and shared guidelines (protocol); and
- Use a facilitator who has deep insight into the subjects being discussed.

Conversation protocols

These key aspects of professional learning conversations are facilitated by the use of protocols. They allow for structured conversations that create a set of shared learnings and can be defined as an “agreed upon set of guidelines for conversations” (Easton, 2009, p.1). Protocols

provide a space for groups to explore ideas together and stimulate highly focused and rich conversations. They allow participants to create collective knowledge, leading to deeper understanding and action not only individually but also across the whole group. In this way, participants are empowered to safely challenge widespread or underlying assumptions and to engage in constructive feedback processes.

Successful learning conversations utilising a protocol approach are ideally enabled by a knowledgeable facilitator who seeks to encourage participants to share and, in particular, to deepen their understanding as they take turns to listen and speak. For protocols to become an effective learning tool, they need to be based on a set of common assumptions that are frequently negotiated by the group (see Part 3 for a sample protocol).

WHY USE A CONVERSATIONAL APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT?

In keeping with the assumptions made about distributed leadership of learning and teaching, a conversational approach was seen as the most respectful way to engage emerging leaders in leadership development as part of the Emerging Leaders project. Conversational approaches provide a forum where what participants know, believe and do in practice comes to the surface quite naturally. Within the context of the conversation protocol, views presented in the small group can be engaged with, discussed and challenged for the purpose of further learning. Reflection on past experiences of leadership, traits and behaviours of leaders, and situations that required leadership quickly give way to considering one's own identity as a leader.

Rather than utilising a leadership training model that focuses primarily on knowledge transmission or skill development, the conversational approach specifically draws on the knowledge and experience from

within the group, which forms a basis for collaborative learning and relationship building.

Adopting a structured conversation framework also creates a specific learning culture for leadership as it allows participants to engage in professional discussions by using guidelines for safely challenging assumptions, using evidence-driven arguments, building common language, and giving and receiving feedback. The conversational approach can be further enriched by utilising a range of resources (e.g. pre-reading, post-discussion) to engage participants and provide stimuli for reflection.

The next part of this guide shows how the concept of professional learning conversations can be implemented using a protocol-based approach.

3 *IMPLEMENTING A PROFESSIONAL*

LEARNING CONVERSATION SERIES

Since conversation protocols are “simply an agreed upon set of guidelines for conversation” (Easton, 2009, p.1), the question then arises how professional learning conversations using a protocol as their framework should best be set up. This part of the guide provides good practice guidelines for implementing professional learning conversations to effect conceptual change within a learning and teaching context.

CONCEPTUALISING A SERIES

It is helpful to conceptualise professional learning conversations as a **series of conversations** leading to particular outcomes that takes place over a specific timeframe with a select group of participants.

When thinking about implementing a conversation series, the following five key elements need to be considered:

1. **Why** is the conversation series taking place? What is its purpose?
2. **What** are the key topics? Themes? Principles?
3. **Who** are the participants? How are they selected? What will they do in the conversation? Who else is involved in the conversation (e.g. conversation leaders)?
4. **When** and where are the conversations taking place?

5. **How** are the conversations framed? Is there any preparation? Prior reflection? What is the protocol for each conversation? How is it negotiated?

Why?

Perhaps the most fundamental consideration needs to be given to the underlying rationale and purpose upon which the conversation series is to be based. Participants involved in the conversations need to be clear on the purpose of the conversations and why they are participating in the program in order to engage in the conversations constructively.

To generate buy-in, it is crucial for those facilitating the program to advocate for it across the institution, especially with and through executive and senior staff.

What?

Depending on the subject that the professional learning conversations are exploring, the identified topics or principles should be challenging and complex enough to be worthwhile discussing in depth. Professional learning conversations are not the right tool for topics where the outcome is pre-determined.

Consideration of the learning outcomes should guide the topic selection for the series and for each conversation. Topics should be planned in advance but flexibility is required if adaptations need to be made to facilitate effective conversation progression and engage participants.

Who?

Participant selection should be dependent on the outcomes that have been set for the conversation series. It may be a requirement for all staff in a particular area to engage in the conversation series as part of professional development, or the conversation series may be used as a tool to prepare a group for an organisational change or to help solve

an organisational or shared problem. Alternatively, members might be selected as a form of recognition or to prepare them for more responsibility. They may also self-select because they are interested in the topic of the conversation series.

Consideration has to be given to planned homogeneity or heterogeneity in relation to the goals of the conversation series. Diversity (backgrounds, levels of experience, etc.) might be important to achieve some outcomes but unnecessary or undesirable for others. Having a clear idea of who to involve will be crucial for creating conversations that stimulate but also challenge participants effectively.

The size of the group overall and the size of each conversation group must ensure that every participant will have opportunities for substantive conversation, that is, exchanges that last beyond a simple initiation and response, are reciprocal and provide opportunities to develop shared understanding (Tanko & Atweh, 2012).

Participants should also be encouraged to develop professional relationships outside the immediate conversation (e.g. by providing coffee vouchers) as this will further foster group cohesion.

Conversation leaders may also be invited to stimulate discussion by bringing a strong message to the conversation, into the small-group conversations and for individual reflection.

If the conversation series is to include conversation leaders, it is vital to identify conversation leaders who have the credentials and esteem to provoke the group appropriately, are able to provide authentic and challenging input, and are genuinely interested in connecting with participants as part of the conversation. Conversation leaders may be invited to present introductory comments on the topic for stimulating discussion or be asked to act as a source of data. In any case, thought needs to be given as to how and when conversation leaders are briefed so that the ensuing conversation is facilitated successfully.

Conversation Leader

Invited executive leaders from across the university or beyond who share a message relevant to the topic, stimulate discussion and provoke participants' thoughts. Distinct from the conversation facilitator who structures the conversation.

Another way to use conversation leaders may be to form a panel that presents various views on the same issue and challenges participants to engage with contrasting perspectives.

When and where?

Like most forms of professional development, the conversation series needs to occur when participants have the time and space to be involved. The timing of the conversations needs to enable momentum but also allow for reflection between each conversation. Depending on the needs of the organisation and the participants, weekly, fortnightly or monthly works best. Setting and sharing the dates for the whole series before it begins is an effective strategy for ensuring all participants can be involved.

The location needs to enable whole group and breakout conversations to occur with ease. Moving outside of the regular work environment is helpful for engagement. Creating an atmosphere that recognises and values participants' time and engagement, using high-quality resources and providing refreshments all enable the participants to feel more engaged with the conversation, and allow for social coherence and commitment to the group's activities to develop. Additionally, the informal time as people gather before the formal conversation begins is a helpful transition from other activities that participants have been engaged in throughout their busy workday.

Once the program has finished, it is important to celebrate the end of the conversation series and acknowledge participants' time commitment through some form of recognition (e.g. small thank-you gifts or certificates).

How?

The planning, execution and evaluation of a conversation series is complex. In this section it is addressed in some detail so that the process can be replicated.

A conversation series is an iterative process where each conversation includes:

- A ***pre-text*** for the conversation (What is the underlying driver or principle? How is the conversation framed?);
- **Preparation** for the facilitator as well as participants;
- The actual **conversation** taking place, utilising a protocol; and
- The opportunity to **debrief** and thus inform the structure or shape the direction of the next conversation.

Pre-text

For this project, the meaning of *pre-text* draws on Cecily O'Neill's (1995) seminal work in this area. A pre-text in the context of professional learning conversations is a source or stimulus that initiates participants' engagement with the topic. Further, the pre-text becomes a source of evidence that can be brought to bear in the conversation itself. Depending on the topic that is being prepared, the pre-text can be any appropriate artefact or "text" that is shared prior to the conversation, for example, pre-reading, video extracts/summaries, images, statistics or questions. Whatever is selected or created should be the appropriate level and length for participants, encourage reflection, invite exploration and engage participants in the possibility of transformative learning.

Preparation

Being prepared is the key to ensuring successful conversations take place. This applies to both the facilitator and participants. Whilst the facilitator needs to be knowledgeable, have a firm grasp of the principle or theme to be discussed, and be ready to structure the conversation effectively, participants should be given the opportunity to prepare for the conversation through interaction with the pre-text/s. In addition, the facilitator — or project staff — needs to make the required logistical preparations. This may include:

- Developing or sourcing pre-texts (pre-readings, videos or other stimulus material) and setting up an online environment for pre/post discussion, including providing access for participants;
- Preparing briefings for conversation leaders (including conversation questions, briefing papers);
- Sending invitations/reminders to participants and conversation leaders;
- Organising room bookings and catering; and
- Setting up recording equipment (as required) and post-editing.

For more details on the logistical preparations, see Part 5, which provides a sample timeline.

Conversations

Adopting protocols as a learning tool for structuring conversations fosters collaborative dialogues and keeps participants' attention focused on the principle to be discussed. Furthermore, pre-texts or other evidence can play a critical role since “[u]sing protocols to promote dialogue around a common reading assignment is less threatening than conversations focused on personal practice” (Glaude, 2011, p.2).

Ideally, protocols for a conversation series show several common elements but they should also allow participants and the facilitator the space to negotiate the protocol for the next session. Protocols need to be developed to fit the purpose and time constraints of the conversation series and to be adapted as necessary. Professional learning conversations using protocols tend to last around 45–60 minutes, ideally with 6–7 participants (per group), in order to facilitate effective group discussion and allow everyone to contribute their thoughts. Glaude (2011, p.7) also suggests that note-taking should be discouraged in order to promote deep listening.

Participants may either help develop the protocol or agree to its format at the start of the conversation. This supports an iterative and reflective approach. The conversation is structured to elicit participants' initial reflections, to share and interrogate key ideas and to discuss the influence of these on their learning.

Debrief

The end of each conversation is marked by the opportunity to debrief, another key element of conversation protocols: how did the protocol support the conversation and how might it be improved for the next one. Debriefing is an iterative process, both with participants and amongst the facilitating team members or project staff.

Conversation protocol

A sample conversation protocol may look like this:

1. **Introduction**/aim of the protocol, including any changes made to the protocol since the last conversation, based on negotiation and debrief with participants (facilitator-led). (3 min)
2. Opportunity for individual **reflection** (from the stimulus materials, message from the conversation leader, or other artefacts and data). (10 min)
3. **Group dialogue** creating shared understanding and learning. (15 min)
4. **Response** and closure. (15 min)
5. **Debrief** of the conversation process and negotiation for next conversation protocol. (5-7 min)

THE THREE PHASES OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CONVERSATION SERIES

Another way to conceptualise implementation of a professional learning conversation series is to frame it as a three-phase process: pre-program, during-program and post-program. Figure 3 shows the three phases for planning a conversation series.

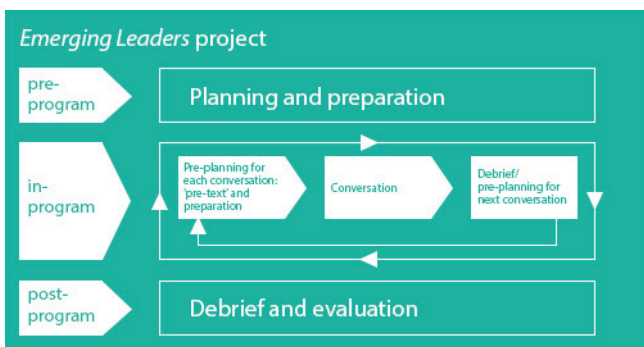


Figure 3: Process for planning a conversation series.

Phase 1: Pre-program

Once the need for a conversation series has been established, the pre-program phase requires significant initial planning and logistical organisation. This includes securing funding for the program, identifying appropriate topics or principles for the series, inviting conversation leaders, choosing an appropriate venue and suitable dates, selecting and inviting participants, developing or selecting the pre-text or stimulus materials, and designing the protocol for the first conversation.

Phase 2: In-program

The second phase is iterative, that is, repeated for each conversation, involving briefings for conversation leaders (where applicable), confirming logistical details, making the pre-text or stimulus materials

available to participants, facilitating the conversation, and then reviewing and refining the conversation protocol.

Phase 3: Post-program

The final phase of the series revolves around celebrating, debriefing and, if desired, formally evaluating the program.

Part 5 provides a sample project timeline for implementing a professional learning conversation.

PREPARING YOURSELF AS A FACILITATOR OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CONVERSATION

Facilitating conversations is a key activity in a successful professional learning conversation series. Who should facilitate each conversation requires thought and insight. It may be useful to have a number of facilitators or to ask the same person to facilitate each conversation.

Facilitators need to have experience in the area for discussion in order to appropriately create and shape the conversation and challenge participants. Ideally, they have a recognised senior role within or beyond the organisation and, crucially, come to the conversation prepared, in terms of both understanding the protocol and being familiar with the topic of that conversation.

Being a good listener and practising active listening is an essential skill for facilitating a professional learning conversation. Facilitators not only need to be able to understand participants' perspectives but they also need to help participants to understand each other (e.g. by drawing on cues or rephrasing statements or comments).

Beyond supporting participants — and the conversation — by actively listening, facilitators manage the conversation. Being sensitive to the ebb and flow within a conversation and being able to manage that by taking action or stepping back appropriately is key to ensuring the conversation remains effective.

Whilst the conversation protocol provides the overall structure, facilitators need to be astute enough to recognise worthwhile diversions and opportunities in the conversation, thus keeping the protocol and conversation dynamic (but also being mindful of the time).

Key to this is the ability to keep the purpose of the conversation in mind and to ask meaningful questions that move the conversation forward or get it back on track. This is especially important when challenging events occur, for example, when the conversation comes to a stop and participants have nothing to contribute or when participants seize the stage and dominate the interaction.

Equally important is being able to recognise when the conversation is going well and to reflect on how a positive or empowering conversation was generated. When facilitators are able to step down as “expert” and adopt the stance of a genuine co-inquirer alongside the participants, robust but respectful and meaningful conversations tend to develop as a result. In this way, participants and facilitators help each other to come to new understandings. Participants feel empowered through such conversations as they have been given agency and the opportunity to raise genuine questions and issues.

At the end, it is important to close the conversation effectively by summarising the key points and allowing participants to reflect on what new insights they gained, and by seeking feedback from participants on the protocol itself.

It is helpful to have a project facilitator debrief, whether that is the same day or a day or two after the conversation has taken place. This allows the facilitators to reflect on and share their experience whilst impressions are still fresh, and provides the opportunity to review and revise the protocol in preparation for the next conversation.

Another important facilitator activity is to share and test with participants their own reflections on and key points and

understandings taken from a specific conversation. This can be done through email or other shared discussion forums, if they are being used, and is best done as a follow-up after each conversation. This process continues the iterative and transformative potential of the overall approach to professional learning and development (see Figure 3).

4 **ADOPTING A CONVERSATIONAL**

APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP AT USC

Part 4 of the *Good practice guide* provides a practical example of how professional learning conversations may be implemented by presenting the Emerging Leaders project as a case study.

EMERGING LEADERS AT USC

The Emerging Leaders project at USC explored the merits of adopting a conversational leadership approach to academic development (learning and teaching) by considering how the principles for executive leadership could be applied to the work of emerging leaders of learning and teaching.

A group of twenty-one emerging academic leaders was invited to participate in a series of professional learning conversations structured around the five leadership principles from the *Handbook of executive leadership in learning and teaching in higher education* (McInnis, Ramsden & Maconachie, 2012). The conversation series involved facilitated discussions with university executive leaders and the emerging leaders, as well as small-group discussions based on a professional learning conversation protocol.

A key aspect of the project was to integrate a conversational approach to leadership with a principles-focused program in order to engage participants in specific topics and prepare them for their future as academic leaders.

The handbook is the result of the OLT grant *A Handbook: Leadership for Excellence in Learning and Teaching* (2011–2012), and provides an evidence-based response to the challenges of leadership and implementing effective practices in learning and teaching in higher education.

The espoused principles demonstrate a planned distributed approach to leadership of learning and teaching whilst recognising the significant formal responsibilities of executive leaders in the university setting.

The conversations were fantastic because I had a chance to learn about higher management and I experienced how higher management sees the university and the strategies applied.

Emerging Leaders program participant

They are of primary relevance for executive leaders, but also have application to the work of emerging leaders.

Project structure

The project was led by four project facilitators representing the two faculties at USC, learning and teaching, and human resources.

Academic staff from a range of disciplines and schools were nominated by their Head of School or Executive Dean and invited to take part in the leadership program. These academics were identified as emerging leaders because of their current involvement as **program leaders** and/or an interest in future academic leadership.

Program Leader

Academic staff who coordinate and lead an entire degree or program of study, either at undergraduate or postgraduate level (e.g. Bachelor of Business).

It's so powerful when someone senior comes along and says "Mate, I believe in what you're doing. I think you should go along to this." That's powerful.

Emerging Leaders program participant

The program involved participation in six face-to-face conversations of two hours, held about one month apart. The first hour was structured as a plenary session with an invited conversation leader

who represented the university's executive or similar leadership role. This leader introduced the principle for discussion and provided their perspective on its meaning. On one occasion the conversation was led by a student panel, whilst on another the panel represented professional and executive academic staff of the university.

All those conversations that we have, or that we had, with the DVC and the VC, it was good to hear them say "we need you".

Emerging Leaders program participant

The second hour was conducted in three small groups of 5 or 6 participants. Groups were reorganised each time to encourage relationship development beyond existing friendship groups or school-level alignments. In the small groups, participants had the opportunity to provide an individual reflection on the message, stimulus materials or reflection questions; they then engaged in discussing their understanding of the respective principle and how it related to their academic practice as emerging leaders.

There was different dynamics every time because you were with a different set of people, which was, I think, really important ... So I think moving groups meant that you heard from someone new and you're facilitated again by someone new, which meant that there were two dynamic shifts and, of course, the conversation was different. So there were three dynamic shifts. I think that was great.

Emerging Leaders program participant

The small group also facilitated relationship building and interaction through sharing reflections on the discussion held in first hour. This part of the 2-hour conversation was structured around a specifically developed professional learning conversation protocol.

All small-group sessions were audio-recorded for analysis purposes; in addition, the plenary sessions were video-recorded, and 5–10 minute edited versions, constituting summaries of the learnings, were made available online for participants to reflect on following each conversation.

All of those things made a very big difference because they show respect. They are about saying you're important, this process is important, we value you, we value the process, we want you to take time here. I thought all of that was just fantastic.

Emerging Leaders program participant

All meetings, plenary sessions and subsequent small groups were facilitated by the project leaders. To acknowledge the importance of the program, meetings were held at the Chancellery, with drinks and light refreshments provided each time. The end of the program was marked at a special occasion to which all executive leaders who had participated in the conversation series were invited to attend. Participants' involvement and contribution were specifically recognised with small thank-you gifts.

In terms of the structure of the conversation series, the first conversation provided an introduction to the program's conversational approach based around the five principles. It also allowed participants to become familiar with the *principled approach to leadership*. Subsequent conversations then explored how each principle applies to or is relevant for emerging academic leaders.

Prior to each conversation, pre-texts were made available online, allowing participants to prepare for the conversation. Participants were encouraged to:

- Read the relevant chapter from the handbook;
- Reflect on provocative conversation questions that prompted their thinking and engaged them with the topic;
- Watch a pre-recorded video introduction from each guest speaker/panel that outlined the key theme for discussion; and
- Engage in the online discussion forum, post further questions and interact with each other (both prior to and after the conversation).

The pre-conversation materials were supplemented with other relevant information as needed, such as university or sectoral data and links to other significant resources (e.g. OLT grants, journal articles).

During the conversation series, other opportunities for joint meetings arose, including a meeting with the Chief Financial Officer that provided an overview of how funding and budgeting are structured across higher education and, specifically, the university. These meetings were held outside the formal conversation series.

Following the completion of the program, participants were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview and evaluate the program. Interviews were audio-recorded and conducted one-on-one with one of the project leaders.

Establishing a protocol for Emerging Leaders

The Emerging Leaders project developed a conversation protocol for conducting the second part of each conversation: the small-group discussions that allowed participants to reflect on the topic shared in the first hour and to engage in discussion.

Each small-group conversation was facilitated using a common protocol, developed collaboratively by the project leaders. The protocol was then adapted for each conversation based on feedback and negotiation at the previous conversation. Common elements across all conversations included a brief introduction to the protocol for the respective conversation, followed by an opportunity for each participant to reflect on the message from the preceding plenary session and the broader leadership principle to be discussed. Participants were then encouraged to respond and to discuss key questions and issues raised, and to provide constructive feedback or challenge beliefs. Conversations concluded with the opportunity to debrief the protocol and to provide suggestions for improvement. At various times, participants created their own summaries of the conversation.

Whilst the protocol for this project was developed specifically for emerging academic leaders, it can be applied to a range of topics or contexts relevant to learning and teaching.

I found it really useful to watch the video beforehand, to know what kind of conversation we were having. So that was really good.

Emerging Leaders program participant

The next section constitutes a short record of each conversation that provides a high-level illustration of the principles, highlights some of the issues considered, and identifies key themes that emerged from the professional learning conversations.

Introductory conversation ~ A principled approach to leadership

The age of the entrepreneurial university requires a lot more proactive leadership across the whole institution.

Don Maconachie, Director, Executive Projects Unit, USC
Introductory Conversation Leader

The Emerging Leaders project began the conversation series with a general introductory session, prior to which participants had been invited to reflect on several questions, including what leadership means.

Reflection questions

- ❖ What do you hope to get out of the series of conversations?
- ❖ What does *leadership* mean to you?
- ❖ Why do you think leadership in the context of learning and teaching is important?
- ❖ What challenges do you think leaders in learning and teaching face?

The first part of this session allowed participants to get to know each other, the project leaders to discuss the purpose of the leadership program, and participants' involvement (*Why are you here?*), as well as including some general housekeeping (e.g. ethics processes). More importantly though, the first meeting introduced participants to the concepts of professional learning conversations, using protocols, and the principles-based approach to leadership, which set the scene for subsequent conversations.

Research suggests that leadership is to good teaching what good teaching is to good learning: the creation of an environment that causes teachers to want to produce their best is a critical factor in how well they perform as teachers and therefore how well the students learn. Leadership is essential in that regard, it drills right through to the quality of learning.

Don Maconachie, Director, Executive Projects Unit, USC
Introductory Conversation Leader

The plenary session was then continued by a guest speaker from the university executive leadership team, who presented the core elements of the five leadership principles and focused participants' attention on two broad questions:

Course Coordinators

Academic staff who coordinate a course (unit) of study, either at undergraduate or postgraduate level (e.g. Introduction to Economics).

1. What can practically be done to implement the principles and elements outlined in the handbook?
2. What are the implications for academic leadership sub-executive level (e.g. deans, program leaders, **course coordinators**)?

Participants then broke into small groups, reflecting in particular on what leadership means and on their personal leadership journey (see Part 5 for the full conversation protocol).

Key themes that emerged during the small-group discussions were:

- Acknowledging that teaching quality and retention are complex but important issues;
- Recognising the need for creating collaborative practices amongst academic staff;
- Establishing team/peer support structures and mentoring relationships as powerful tools for improving teaching practices; and
- Considering what makes a good leader.

Conversation 1 ~ Shaping the strategic vision

Understand what the vision is, demystify fact from fiction in the debate. Reinforce that to improve, change is critical.

Professor Greg Hill, Vice-Chancellor and President, USC
Conversation 1 Leader

The first principles-focused conversation invited participants to consider the relevance and importance of a university's strategic vision of learning and teaching by engaging with the first principle in the handbook.

Principle 1

- ❖ Applying up to date knowledge of how teaching influences learning
- ❖ Identifying the institutional factors that affect student success
- ❖ Conceptualising the future student experience
- ❖ Assessing the current performance of the institution
- ❖ Balancing collegial and managerial imperatives

As McInnis et al. (2012) outline in their handbook, a “clear and inspiring vision” of learning and teaching is a “critical element in determining the credibility and impact of executive leadership” (p.13). For a strategic vision to be powerful, it needs to be compelling, inspiring, and underpinned by a strong rationale that considers current knowledge, national and international trends and data, and institutional factors that affect the student experience and outcomes. The strategic vision also needs to be aligned to an institution's core values and objectives, as well as clearly conceptualise and shape the future learning and teaching experience. To sustain the creative momentum of a strategic vision, leaders will need to gather support and create commitment from across all areas within an institution, including academic, professional and support staff.

Leading up to the conversation, participants were encouraged to reflect broadly on the importance of strategic visions for learning and

teaching and, more specifically, consider USC's strategic vision for learning and teaching.

Reflection questions

- ❖ Why is a strategic vision important for learning and teaching?
- ❖ How would you describe USC's strategic vision for learning and teaching?
- ❖ What can you do as an Emerging Leader to shape and share the strategic vision?
- ❖ As a result of our conversation so far, what does leadership mean to you?

Given the importance the strategic vision plays for any institution, the guest speaker for this conversation was USC's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Greg Hill, who addressed USC's strategic vision for learning and teaching, challenged participants to reflect on their leadership potential, and inspired them to take the next step in their journey and academic practice.

Key themes that arose from the learning conversations include:

- Recognising the importance of being creative and connecting new ideas with data, shaping them into coherent innovations and plans in order to contribute to strategic vision and effect change;
- Keeping abreast of current trends and new directions that impact on strategic visions and leadership priorities;
- Recognising that “leadership is a choice”; being a leader with purpose; and recognising that leadership can, at times, be uncomfortable;
- Seeking advice from leaders around you: developing a culture of sharing and collaboration to “bring out the best in others”; and
- Being aware that leadership activities need to be aligned with the strategic vision and plans.

Conversation 2 ~ Inspiring and enabling excellence

Emerging Leaders' role includes being a champion of the vision within the university, innovators, exemplars for their colleagues, and also being savvy about what's happening in the higher education space and in their own university.

Professor Birgit Lohmann, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, USC
Conversation 2 Leader

The next conversation gave participants the opportunity to engage with the second principle in the handbook and reflect on how achieving excellence in learning and teaching can be translated into academic and leadership practice.

Principle 2

- ❖ Maintaining personal credibility through leadership in interpreting and shaping the national policy landscape
- ❖ Developing a coherent set of policies and objectives that support the vision
- ❖ Presenting the vision as achievable with early wins and long-term change in sight
- ❖ Developing a focused learning and teaching plan
- ❖ Securing sufficient funds to support the vision
- ❖ Creating the conditions that enable academics to strive for excellence in teaching
- ❖ Stimulating staff engagement

Having a strong understanding of the higher education landscape and current national — if not international — trends allows leaders to genuinely inspire the university community to strive for excellence in learning and teaching (McInnis et al., 2012). This then translates into being committed to shaping and improving key learning and teaching policies, systems and conditions in alignment with the vision and within the institution. It also includes drawing on accurate data and evidence (e.g. meaningful performance measures) to inform these decisions and positively impact the student experience, as well as understanding that support across the university community and

developing momentum are critical to effecting positive change. Being committed to excellence is reflected in adopting collaborative practices that establish a sense of ownership amongst academic and professional staff, and in aligning aspirations with appropriate funding allocations.

Promoting excellence in learning and teaching explicitly is about sharing the vision, removing roadblocks and setting up systems and processes that enable all staff to practice and strive for excellence.

As preparation for the conversation, participants considered how excellence can be inspired in staff and how this benefits the broader university community.

Reflection questions

- ❖ What benefits can be gained by the university community, by teams, and by individuals through pursuing excellence in learning and teaching?
- ❖ Which leadership attributes could you employ to inspire and enable excellence in learning and teaching?
- ❖ As a result of our conversations so far, how has your understanding of leadership changed?

Guest speaker, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Professor Birgit Lohmann, then challenged participants' thinking and views on leadership and excellence during the plenary session, asking them to reflect on how leaders can make a contribution and inspire others.

The subsequent professional learning conversations saw these **key themes** emerge:

- Adopting collaborative leadership approaches to inspire others, effect change and communicate effectively, thus establishing trust amongst the university community/members;
- Recognising that colleagues/staff may have different agendas but, seeking to identify synergies first, build trust and gain

support, thus moving towards creating solutions and not just identifying problems;

- Having an awareness of the broader context to inform decision-making, incl. budgets, policy, organisational values, situational differences;
- Recognising policy as a forward-focusing tool that can help give direction, inspire others and lead to excellence;
- Being strategic in making choices (incl. being a leader by choice), especially since time is a precious commodity and every choice or opportunity has a cost;
- Recognising the importance of students and their voice, especially in a climate where research is highly valued; and
- Pursuing excellence and passion in teaching to enhance the student experience.

Conversation 3 ~ Devolving leadership of learning and teaching

Devolved leadership is the actual converse of micro-management. It's not a different layer of micro-management. It's taking shared responsibility for the decisions being made.

Craig McInnis, Director, PhillipsKPA
Conversation 3 Leader

Following discussions about strategic visions and how to implement them, the third conversation then invited participants to consider the value of devolving leadership (Principle 3) to ensure “wide ownership” (McInnis et al., 2012, p.27) and shared responsibility amongst staff in realising the strategic vision.

Principle 3

- ❖ Ordered flexibility in the approach to implementation
- ❖ Aligning faculty and departmental leadership of teaching with institutional goals
- ❖ Building a critical mass of leaders of learning and teaching
- ❖ Promoting collaborative approaches to the improvement of learning and teaching

Successful leadership requires “flexibility in how a vision is delivered and practised” (McInnis et al., 2012, p.27), thus making the conversation around achieving institutional goals a much broader one and resulting in greater buy-in from staff and students across the university community. Key to establishing widespread ownership and engagement is the effective alignment of management actions and clearly articulated institutional goals and collegial values, as well as developing committed leaders who can inspire and advance the institution’s vision across their sphere of influence and take responsibility on an institutional level. Devolution is not about delegation; it involves shared responsibilities, being able to make discretionary decisions at the local level, and establishing a culture of collective understanding and collaboration.

Mechanisms for devolving leadership, engaging staff across various levels of the organisation, and implementing objectives include utilising existing groups (e.g. academic boards, committees, academic development units) and, where necessary, establishing formal reporting structures to help monitor and evaluate progress. This should be done with a cooperative perspective in mind that seeks to recognise excellence but is also keen to learn from best practice at other institutions. Lastly, as McInnis et al. (2012) point out, involving students, and thus sharing responsibilities, needs to be recognised as a highly productive means to achieving institutional goals and implementing learning and teaching objectives successfully.

Prior to the conversation, participants were invited to reflect on a number of questions, engage with the respective chapter in the handbook, and consider the issue of “boundary crossing” through a provided text.

Reflection questions

- ❖ What do you think the key features of a devolved approach to leadership in learning and teaching are?
- ❖ What are the benefits and challenges of devolving leadership in this way?
- ❖ What is the role of our senior leaders in a devolved leadership model?
- ❖ What do leaders at the local level need to do?

The plenary session for Conversation 3 was led by one of the authors of the handbook, Director of PhilipsKPA, Dr Craig McInnis. Craig shared his own leadership journey with participants and provided insights on what devolved leadership means in practical terms.

Participants then discussed the implications of devolved leadership and reflected on Craig McInnis’s message in small groups. **Key themes** identified were:

- Being accountable and responsible, having goals and direction, working collaboratively and sharing wisdoms as

fundamentals for effective leadership (though some of these may not be supported by current systems);

- Making space for conversations, whether informal or formal;
- Recognising that your actions act as a catalyst, linking people, projects and ideas, and that stepping forward with your ideas as a leader is key;
- Accepting that tensions between individual work spaces and collective work spaces exist, but that these can be harnessed for productive outcomes by creating synergies and finding new directions; and
- Acknowledging that there needs to be a balance between “corporate practices” (strategic visions, institutional goals, individual performance plans) and “academic autonomy”.

Conversation 4 ~ Rewarding, recognising and developing teaching

I see that [recognising/rewarding teaching] really happening in the uni now, and I think people are a lot happier, too, with that recognition.

Emerging Leader program participant

The fourth conversation focused participants on the question of how teaching excellence can be rewarded and recognised appropriately within the broader context of institutional values, priorities and drivers.

Principle 4

- ❖ Setting clear institutional expectations about the nature and outcomes of effective teaching
- ❖ Ensuring that deans and heads acknowledge and reward the teaching function of individuals and academic units
- ❖ Linking formal rewards (e.g. promotions, awards, financial incentives) to teaching excellence and the performance of academic units
- ❖ Aligning professional development opportunities with strategic learning and teaching goals
- ❖ Promoting the university as a successful teaching institution

As McInnis et al. (2012) point out, recognising and valuing teaching excellence appropriately continues to be a controversial issue in higher education, with many academics believing that “teaching is undervalued compared with research” (p.31). To promote effective teaching, clear institutional expectations about teaching excellence need to be set and driven in a top-down approach: Communicating the importance and integral nature of teaching (including student retention) as core business needs to be viewed as a key priority for senior leaders and, in fact, the whole university community.

Incentives for formal teaching awards (both internal and external) as well as advancing teaching excellence through academic promotion schemes provide explicit means for improving the value of teaching. In addition, engaging academic development or other support units to

develop and enrich effective teaching practices is vital for communicating institutional commitment across the university and the broader community, thereby positioning the university as an institution that provides an outstanding student experience.

Before the conversation, participants had been asked to reflect on what “effective teaching” is and how they, as emerging leaders, can take on an active role in promoting excellence and rewarding outstanding teaching achievements. In addition to the introduction video, reflection questions and the relevant chapter in the handbook, participants were provided with a text on “agency in leadership”.

Reflection questions

- ❖ What is USC’s expectation about the nature and outcomes of effective teaching?
- ❖ Why is developing, recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching important to the organisation?
- ❖ What role can you play in activating this principle?

Conversation 4 was led by a panel of senior leaders, comprising of two faculty deans, the director of human resources, and a head of school.

Having a panel opened the conversation to different perspectives around learning and teaching. It gave participants the opportunity to exchange ideas and enter into a forum with senior leaders about how the university can enrich its support and increase recognition of learning and teaching excellence. The panel in turn was keen to instil a sense of enthusiasm and passion, encouraging participants to consider their role in advancing learning and teaching across the university.

The small-group session continued this conversation, with participants reflecting on their practice and how they could tangibly shape and influence the future of learning and teaching.

Key themes coming out of the conversation include:

- Acknowledging that learning and teaching leadership, especially on the program leader level, happens both within the classroom and out of class, with the latter being much less recognised than in-class activities;
- The importance of maintaining passion in teaching and finding the catalyst to reinvigorate the passion for learning and teaching periodically;
- Being able to constantly adapt and take time to reflect on one's leadership skills;
- Recognising mentoring relationships as the most effective mechanism to build learning and teaching leadership capacity;
- Learning how research and teaching form a nexus rather than considering teaching being an “add-on”; and
- From an institutional perspective, recognising that intrinsic rewards are key (with autonomy at the centre), whilst the need for or pursuit of external rewards (e.g. official awards) may vary between individuals.

Conversation 5 ~ Involving students

How do we involve students when we go above and beyond the classroom? How do we ensure that we have student engagement and involvement in the whole class, starting with semester 1?

Emerging Leader program participant

The last session in the leadership program brought another panel of guest speakers into the conversation, focusing on the fifth principle of the handbook: Involving students.

Principle 5

- ❖ Reviewing the relationship between all aspects of university life contributing to, or hindering, student engagement and involvement
- ❖ Designing systems that promote student involvement in academic quality processes
- ❖ Seeking student advice to improve teaching, the curriculum and the student experience
- ❖ Providing incentives for deans and heads to encourage students to engage in faculty and departmental learning communities

Whilst involving students as “active partners and change agents in shaping their learning experience” (McInnis et al., 2012, p.35) poses challenges for tertiary institutions, it also opens up opportunities for students take some ownership over the quality of their student experience. Engaging students may initially require high-level strategic reviews and discussion around how students can best be involved across the whole institution and the entire student lifecycle. Systems, processes, incentives and representative groups may need to be established to promote and embed student contributions in meaningful ways that lead to a sense of shared responsibility between academics, administrators and students.

Student involvement does not need to be limited to improving learning and teaching; from a whole-of-institution point of view it may encompass aspects such as quality control and enhancement, audit and review processes, and even budgetary and financial input. Involvement

at the local (departmental) level should be encouraged by heads of school, and at faculty level and across the broader institution by senior executive leaders.

Participants were invited to consider the value of involving students that specifically relates to them in their roles as emerging leaders in learning and teaching.

Reflection questions

- ❖ What value is there in involving students at USC?
- ❖ What do we do to involve students?
- ❖ How do they know that their voices are heard?
- ❖ In which areas do you think students would be interested in having shared responsibility and input?
- ❖ What leadership is needed from you to involve students in learning and teaching related activities?

Four students took part in this conversation as a student panel, representing a range of backgrounds and perspectives. The conversation largely revolved around the question of assessment and how to bring the real world into student assessment tasks, and around engagement in class and teaching effectively and in a relational way.

Leadership requires boldness and bravery, requires risk taking and requires giving students a voice — ask them.

*Associate Professor Jennifer Rowe
Conversation Facilitator*

The **key themes** that emerged from the subsequent small-group conversations were:

- Being mindful of taking a relational approach to teaching and student engagement, and being aware that this takes time, as well as recognising that “belonging” is a core aspect of students’ university experience;
- The need for creating physical spaces that encourage staff–student interaction (relationally) and shared ownership;

- Taking into account the fact that students are time poor and can feel pressured by assessment, and seeking to address this by developing relevant assessment activities that incorporate “outside of class” activities;
- Building on students’ existing knowledge by creating assessment that has a clear purpose and has wider implications for the real world;
- Sharing best practice with colleagues and adopting mentoring approaches to develop effective teaching practices across all programs (e.g. to address differences between undergraduate and postgraduate teaching approaches);
- Reviewing opportunities for student engagement so that they have clear avenues for input into learning and teaching practices in relevant, positive and recognised ways; and
- Seeking to engage students and collaborate with them through informal conversations about **ideas**, not just being focused on their feedback, and then sharing changes actively with students.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

I feel a lot more part of USC and I feel like I have the ability to shape who we will become in the future through my actions and that, to me, has made a real link.

Emerging Leaders program participant

Formative evaluation took place throughout the program. A midpoint, semi-structured evaluation showed that participants had positive perceptions about the collegial networking; meeting and having time to discuss issues with executive leaders; the small-group conversations; the affirmation they were receiving about their approach; and the attention to the logistics surrounding the conversations that indicated their importance to the organisation, in particular, the location, food, wine and atmosphere. An area they indicated interest in was receiving strategic career-planning advice.

In the post-program phase, the exit interviews conducted with all participants revealed a number of outcomes that they felt had been achieved (see Part 5 for the interview guideline). They were asked questions in relation to three areas: reflections on the program in terms of the five leadership principles; reflections on the conversations in terms of developing and using the protocol; and the ongoing influence of the program in terms of application to learning and teaching leadership practice.

In particular, the following key themes were identified:

Leadership principles

- Being exposed to a holistic, relevant and scaffolded set of key principles for leadership in learning and teaching;
- Key principles and conversations that strongly resonated: *Inspiring and enabling excellence* and *Involving students* (giving students a voice);
- Being given a voice as a leader;

- Adopting a distributed leadership approach and making projects/ideas happen (even without a “title”); and
- Leading by example to inspire and enable excellence amongst colleagues across the university.

Conversation protocol

- Having conversation leaders in powerful positions framing the conversation and not only providing the broader context but also challenging and provoking participants;
- Being especially invited and coming together in a relaxing atmosphere (e.g. with food and drink provided);
- Having the opportunity to prepare for the conversation (through the pre-texts, especially the *Brochure*);
- Rearranging the small groups to provide opportunity for different participants and facilitators to engage (i.e. changing dynamics); and
- Engaging in a reflective conversation cycle.

Influence of the program on learning and teaching leadership practice

- Providing an opportunity for building networks;
- Aligning career priorities;
- Understanding place and work in the organisation;
- Generating ideas for pedagogy and curriculum development;
- Engaging in scholarship/projects; and
- Turning conversation into action.

Opportunities to improve the program

- Competing time priorities/teaching commitments;
- Readiness for opportunity in terms of career progress;
- Preparation time for conversations and alignment of actual conversation with preparation;
- Use of online resources and discussion;
- Defining what is meant by *effective learning and teaching*; and

- Reconsidering how students are involved in the conversation.

In terms of changes to participants' work, within three months of the conclusion of the program the following tangible outcomes had occurred:

- Three participants had taken up roles with the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee, University Learning and Teaching Committee or Academic Board;
- In the round of internal learning and teaching grants, nine grants were awarded and, of those, six had one or more Emerging Leaders as project members. Two of the grants had team members who had met at the Emerging Leaders program;
- Two participants had worked together to successfully apply for an OLT Seed Grant (value \$50 000); and
- Fifteen participants extended their Emerging Leaders work into the Expansive Learning Leadership Initiative (ELLI).

A note on ELLI: Broadening the Emerging Leaders extension project

The activity that followed from the Emerging Leaders project was called the Expansive Learning Leadership Initiative (ELLI). ELLI created the opportunity for emerging leaders to move their leadership practice from a conversational space to an action space as part of a defined group. In pairs, participants from the Emerging Leaders group identified a need in the university and designed an activity related to learning and teaching that required leadership action to improve the outcome. They used one or more of the principles from the handbook to develop their approach. This became the focus of a 12-month leadership initiative they led to bring the principles into action. A member of the original project team mentored each pair throughout the project. A sponsor from the senior leadership group was also identified for each group.

Throughout the project, participants were involved in monthly Leadership Laboratories where they probed and reflected on each leadership project to reveal possible shared innovations. The process was designed to promote distributed leadership, developmental transfer and expansive learning.

Conversing about and reflecting on leadership is an important aspect of leadership development — a platform for this has been provided through the Emerging Leaders project. In keeping with the principle that led to the creation of the ELLI project, the focus is not on leadership training but participant activity in leadership initiatives. Some learning challenges, especially those that are complex and hard to define or understand ahead of time, cannot be met by training. Participants acting and learning together across a range of activities, contexts and boundaries can address such challenges (Engeström, 1987).

The purpose of this second phase is to activate the conversations and give participants the opportunity to extend the learning gained through the professional learning conversations into leadership action at the local level. Roth and Lee (2007) believe that “when two or more individuals collaborate, entirely new possibilities unfold” (p.205). Completing a project in pairs will allow this to occur. For the university, this is a way to normalise collaborative and distributed approaches to leadership outside a formal leadership structure, and to broaden the base of academic staff willing and able to engage in leadership of learning and teaching.

5 USEFUL RESOURCES

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CONVERSATION: SAMPLE PROJECT PLAN

Phase 1 — Initial planning (pre-program)	
3 months prior	<p>Project team</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine team roles Schedule regular meetings for program planning Develop project plan and identify risks
3 months prior	<p>Conversation series focus</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify appropriate principles for the conversation series Identify any existing materials that can be drawn upon for the series
3 months prior	<p>Conversation leaders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify appropriate conversation leaders Invite or recruit leaders to participate as conversation leaders in the program Schedule leaders for conversation series and for recording of video introductions (if required)
2–3 months prior	<p>Logistics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify venue Schedule dates and times (based on availability of each conversation leader) Make room bookings Engage various support channels (e.g. audio/visual support if pre-recording material, graphic design support) Identify needs for online space (e.g. features, layout, access, materials)
1–2 months prior	<p>Participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine how to engage participants (e.g. nomination process, self-selected) Engage heads of school/deans to nominate participants (if required) Receive nominations Invite participants to the program, incl. overview of the program, expectations, how to access materials Set up mailing list Seek special dietary requirements

1 month prior	Conversation leaders Prepare briefing for video introduction Pre-record video introductions (if required)
1 month–2 weeks prior	Logistics Determine and advise room setup Book catering Organise notebooks/pens, etc., for participants Develop detailed agenda and schedule for the conversation day Make flights/accommodation arrangements for conversation leaders (if required)
1 month–2 weeks prior	Audio-visual (if required) Review and edit pre-recorded introductions Book recording equipment for conversation
1 month–2 weeks prior	Online space (if required) Design and develop online space, incl. materials Publish materials for participants
1 month–2 weeks prior	Conversation protocol Design initial protocol Develop key questions for participants to consider prior to the conversation (if required)
Phase 2 — Implementation (conversation series/in-program): Recurrent process for each conversation	
1 week prior	Conversation leader Prepare briefing for conversation
1 week prior	Participants Send reminder email to participants
1 week–1 day prior	Logistics Confirm bookings for venue, catering and conversation leader Create name badges for participants Ensure room is setup appropriately on the day
Conversation day	Facilitate conversation
Conversation day–5 days after	Audio-visual (if required) Ensure recording equipment is working on the day (e.g. batteries charged, spare batteries,) Review and edit conversation to provide summary video

5 days after	Online space Upload edited conversation summary materials (e.g. video, visual, written summaries)
Within 5 days after	Conversation protocol Review and refine protocol for next conversation
Phase 3 — Post-implementation (post-program)	
1–2 months before end of program	Logistics Identify venue and date for end-of-program celebration Book venue and catering Organise gifts for participants
1–2 months before end of program	Conversation leaders Invite conversation leaders to end-of-program celebration
2 weeks before the end of program— Celebration day	Participants Invite participants to end-of-program celebration Present gifts/certificates (appreciation)

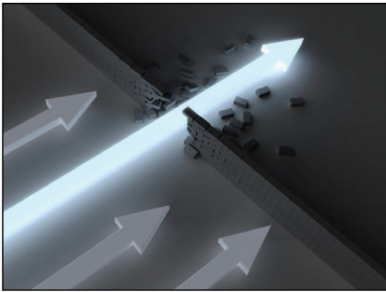
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CONVERSATION: SAMPLE BROCHURE

Professional Learning Conversation Protocol

Crossing boundaries is something generally frowned upon in our society because of its connection with interfering or behaving inappropriately in some way. There is a sense that boundaries should not be crossed and this is probably because at a boundary there is a sense of discontinuity.

However, boundary crossing of the right kind plays a very important role in change and transformation, especially when the change is complex. Engeström et al. (1995, p. 332) define boundary crossing as 'horizontal expertise where practitioners must move across boundaries to seek and give help, to find information and tools wherever they happen to be available.' An example might be an academic interacting both with students as a teacher preparing them for work integrated learning, and with an industry group as a university-based colleague trying to procure work placements. These are simplistic and, for most academics (experienced boundary crossers) readily traversable boundaries, but for a novice, such as a new graduate seeking employment, they might represent a more difficult space.

Boundary crossings become more complex when they include time and space boundaries such as moving from adolescence to adulthood. Entering unfamiliar territory that involves a series of loosely connected systems where "markers of difference are created, maintained or contested at many different levels" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p.135) is a challenging 'boundary crossing' activity. The boundary between two knowledge systems, activities, places or times is an opportunity for growth and development. In fact, the ability to successfully cross boundaries is critical to learning, growth and transformation. It is a dialogical process that requires a tolerance for difference, the ability to take multiple perspectives, a willingness to negotiate and a capacity to live with seeming contradiction, at least for a time. Boundary crossing is a key skill for leaders!



Protocol for Conversation Five

1. Introduction of participants by name, protocol and 'boundary crossing' as a core concept for leaders.
2. Share and reflection on a strong message from first hour conversation. Each participant gives input with little further discussion
3. Implications of the conversation for you: Use data drawn from either the conversation itself or your preparation for this week. Are you noticing any connections between the conversations? Have the conversations prompted you to view, plan or do any part of your work differently?
4. Response: What has emerged during both parts of the conversation so far that are relevant to a deeper understanding of leadership? What has changed from the first conversation to this one?
5. Key themes: If you were to describe the key points of the conversation to another group, what would you say?
6. Debrief the conversation protocol

References:

Akkerman, S. and Bakker, A. (2011). Boundary crossing and boundary objects. *Review of Educational Research*, 81: 2, 132-169.
Engeström, Y., Engeström, R. and Kärkkäinen, M. (1995). Polycontextuality and boundary crossing in expert cognition: Learning and problem solving in complex work activities. *Learning and Instruction*, 5, 319-336.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CONVERSATION: PROTOCOLS

Introductory conversation

1. Introduction of protocol. (2 min)
2. Reflection: Share a strong message or important point that you heard in the whole group conversation and reflect on whether or not this could be considered a principle of leadership. (10 min)
3. Group dialogue: What experiences of leadership have you had (either as a leader or with a leader) that were reflected in the content of the whole group conversation? (15 min)
4. Response: Consider what principles of leadership have emerged during both parts of the conversation that are relevant to a deeper understanding of leadership. (15 min)
5. Debrief: Reflect on the utility of the process. (5 min)

Conversation 1 ~ Shaping the strategic vision

6. Introduction of protocol. (3 min)
7. Reflection: Share and reflect on a strong message from the first hour of conversation, and then give input with brief discussion. (15 min)
8. Implications of the conversation for you: Use data drawn from either the conversation itself or your preparation for this week. (10 min)
9. Response: What has emerged during both parts of the conversation so far that is relevant to a deeper understanding of leadership? What has changed from the first conversation to this one? (15 min)
10. Key themes: If you were to describe the key points of the conversation to another group, what would you say? (10 min)
11. Debrief: Reflect on the conversation protocol. (5 min)

Conversation 2 ~ Inspiring and enabling excellence

12. Introduction of protocol and ‘inquiry habit of mind’ as a core concept for leaders. (3 min)
13. Reflection: Share and reflect on a strong message from the first hour of conversation, and then give input with brief discussion. (15 min)
14. Implications of the conversation for you: Use data drawn from either the conversation itself or your preparation for this week. Are you

noticing any connections between the conversations? Have the conversations prompted you to view, plan or do any part of your work differently? (10 min)

15. Response: What has emerged during both parts of the conversation so far that is relevant to a deeper understanding of leadership? What has changed from the first conversation to this one? (15 min)
16. Key themes: If you were to describe the key points of the conversation to another group, what would you say? (10 min)
17. Debrief: Reflect on the conversation protocol and complete the mid-point evaluation if you haven't already done so. (5 min)

Conversation 3 ~ Devolving leadership in learning and teaching

18. Introduction of protocol and 'boundary crossing' as a core concept for leaders. (3 min)
19. Reflection: Share and reflect on a strong message from the first hour of conversation, and then give input with brief discussion. (15 min)
20. Implications of the conversation for you: Use data drawn from either the conversation itself or your preparation for this week. Are you noticing any connections between the conversations? Have the conversations prompted you to view, plan or do any part of your work differently? (10 min)
21. Response: What has emerged during both parts of the conversation so far that is relevant to a deeper understanding of leadership? What has changed from the first conversation to this one? (15 min)
22. Key themes: If you were to describe the key points of the conversation to another group, what would you say? (10 min)
23. Debrief: Reflect on the conversation protocol. (5 min)

Conversation 4 ~ Rewarding, recognising and developing leadership

24. Introduction of protocol and 'sense of agency' as a core concept for leaders. (3 min)
25. Reflection: Share and reflect on a strong message from the first hour of conversation, and then give input with brief discussion. (10 min)
26. Implications of the conversation for you: Use data drawn from either the conversation itself or your preparation for this week. Are you

- noticing any connections between the conversations? Have the conversations prompted you to view, plan or do any part of your work differently? (15 min)
27. Response: What has emerged during both parts of the conversation so far that is relevant to a deeper understanding of leadership? What has changed from the first conversation to this one? (15 min)
 28. Key themes: If you were to describe the key points of the conversation to another group, what would you say? (10 min)
 29. Debrief: Reflect on the conversation protocol. (5 min)

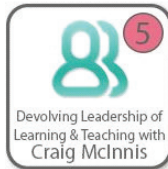
Conversation 5 ~ Involving students

30. Introduction of protocol and ‘conversations of respect and challenge’ as a core concept for leaders. (3 min)
31. Reflection: Share and reflect on a strong message from the first hour of conversation, and then give input with brief discussion. (10 min)
32. Implications of the conversation for you: Use data drawn from either the conversation itself or your preparation for this week. Are you noticing any connections between the conversations? Have the conversations prompted you to view, plan or do any part of your work differently? (15 min)
33. Response: What has emerged during both parts of the conversation so far that is relevant to a deeper understanding of leadership? What has changed from the first conversation to this one? (15 min)
34. Key themes: If you were to describe the key points of the conversation to another group, what would you say? (10 min)
35. Debrief: Reflect on the conversation protocol. (5 min)

ONLINE ENVIRONMENT: EMERGING LEADERS HOME PAGE (INTERNAL ACCESS)

Professional Learning Conversations for Academic Leadership

University of the Sunshine Coast | August - November 2013



C~SALT

Centre for Support and Advancement
of Learning and Teaching



POST-PROGRAM EVALUATION: INTERVIEW GUIDELINE

1. Reflection on the program — LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES

1. Relevance of the five principles as reflection tools on own leadership journey and practice?
2. What has stayed with you?
3. Which of the five is/are most relevant to your own work?
4. Which do you think represent/s the best advice for emerging leaders in higher education?
5. How would you prioritise the principles in terms of meeting current sector needs?
6. What gaps or overlaps (if any) do you notice in the principles?

2. Reflection on the conversations — DEVELOPING THE PROTOCOL

7. Preparatory material — video and readings? Useful, did you get to it, how did it help you prepare?
8. Structure of face to face? Best and worst? Quality of facilitation large group? Quality of facilitation of small group? Value of a pre-prepared protocol?
9. Follow-up interaction — value of edited video summaries — used? Informal interaction? Prompted by coffee vouchers, etc.? Development of professional relationships?
10. Challenges in the program regarding participation, collaboration, time, etc.?
11. Support within local academic area? Did you talk about what you were doing with anyone? Head of School support?

3. Influence of the program and application to learning and teaching leadership practice

12. Do you notice the leadership activity and approaches of others more acutely?
13. Immediate impacts? Changes to your approach to work? View of your academic career? Approach to leadership opportunities?

