

# **Enhancing teacher education practice through professional learning conversations.**

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## **Summary**

The paper discusses the value of peer observation followed by professional learning conversations for professional development of teacher educators. The authors analyse their shared learning experiences and articulate what challenged them in these experiences. They discuss the ways in which their perceptions of this process differed or were similar. The grounding of the experience in a context of trust and professional relationship was seen as an essential part of the learning process. The authors highlight the importance of the cognitive-emotional and personal-professional aspects of teacher educators' lives in supporting their learning through the combination of peer observation and ongoing professional learning conversations.

## **Resumen**

Este documento presenta el valor de la observación y la comunicación entre colegas sobre el aprendizaje y desarrollo profesional de educadores de docentes. Los autores analizan las experiencias compartidas por los docentes sobre este proceso de aprendizaje y mencionan los retos de las mismas. Se discutió la manera en que las percepciones de este proceso difieren o se asemejan. Una parte esencial de este proceso de aprendizaje está basado en la confianza mutua y la relación profesional. Los autores enfatizaron la importancia de los aspectos cognitivo-emocional y

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personal-profesional de la vida de los educadores de docentes en su apoyo al proceso de aprendizaje a través de la observación de colegas y una continua comunicación con ellos.

### **Résumé**

La recherche met en jeu la valeur des observations faites par nos égaux et les discussions de la formation professionnelle qui s'en suivent pour enrichir le développement de ceux qui formeront les futures enseignants. Les auteurs analysent les expériences communes de chacun lors de leur apprentissage et soulignent les défis rencontrés. Ils comparent les manières selon lesquelles leurs perceptions de ces processus diffèrent les unes des autres mais aussi comment elles se ressemblent. Le fait que l'expérience ait été acquise dans un climat de confiance professionnelle est perçu comme un aspect essentiel du processus d'apprentissage. Les auteurs soulignent l'importance de connaître les conditions émotionnelles et personnelles ainsi que l'aspect professionnel de la vie des formateurs pour soutenir leur apprentissage au moyen de la combinaison d'observations des égaux, de conversations et d'échanges continus d'expérience professionnelle.

### **Zusammenfassung**

Dieser Bericht diskutiert den Wert Gleichrangigkeitsbeobachtung mit beruflichen Konversationen begleitet für pädagogische Fortbildung. Die Autoren analysieren ihre gesamten Erfahrungen und besprechen, was sie in diesen Erfahrungen herausgefordert hat. Sie besprechen, wie ihre Einschätzungen des Lernens verschieden oder ähnlich waren. Diese Erfahrung wurde in einem Kontext des professionellen Vertrauens gegründet; das war also ein wichtiger Teil des Lernens. Auf die kognitiven, emotionalen und professionellen Aspekte des Lebens von pädagogischen

Akademikern legen die Autoren großen Wert. Sie unterstützen durch Gleichrangigbeobachtung und andauernde berufliche Diskussionen ihr Lernen.

## **Introduction**

This paper discusses the processes and benefits experienced by a trio of teacher educators who engaged in peer observation, collaborative reflection, critical friendship and improvement-directed practice through a series of professional learning conversations.

Teacher educators function in an increasingly vulnerable political arena in which teacher education reform is regularly debated and policies are formed outside of the teacher education context (Bullough 2000). As well, teacher educators are experiencing the same imperatives and inhibitions in their work as other fields of higher education: these include global drives to improve efficiency and productivity as well as attract clients in a global market (Sachs and Groundwater Smith 1999). However, increased accountability does not necessarily mean enhanced teaching (Schuck, Gordon and Buchanan 2008 in press). Knight and Trowler suggest that ‘attempts to improve teaching by coercion run the risk of producing compliance cultures, in which there is “change without change” while simultaneously compounding negative feelings about academic work’ (2000, 69). Similarly, Church (2005, 12) points out that ‘administrators driven by the need to control often stifle initiatives in which teachers or staff and community members would spontaneously collaborate because of shared interests and goals, substituting what Hargreaves calls “contrived collegiality”’.

Against this backdrop, professional development or professional learning initiatives in which teacher educators work collegially and autonomously to enhance their teaching often struggle for recognition. Yet professional learning within a community of like-minded and empathetic colleagues can be hugely beneficial. Such learning takes account of the importance of ‘self’, the complexities of professional

learning, and the centrality of the emotional dimension in professional practice (Day and Leitch 2001). In this paper, we acknowledge the importance of the four interconnecting areas of teacher educators' lives, as identified by Day and Leitch (2001), namely: the 'cognitive-emotional' and the 'personal-professional' (403) and argue for the need for all these areas to be addressed in our professional development and study of our practices. Underlying our belief in self-study of teacher education practices are the assumptions that emotional well being and personal relationships are central to enhanced teaching practice.

Embedded in self-study of teacher educator practice then, is the importance of the 'other' and of collaboration (Lighthall 2004). Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) argue that teachers and other professionals negotiate their understandings of practice through reflection and learning conversations. In what follows, we highlight the importance of learning conversations, or what Senge (1990, 9) describes as "learningful" conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others'. We outline the way in which our professional development has been enhanced by having professional learning conversations, which were both cognitively and emotionally nourishing for our practice, as well as being significant personally and professionally. We also show how valuable it was to interrogate our understandings of our professional practice, through awareness developed in a community of colleagues, in a similar way to that discussed by Olson and Craig (2001).

In this paper, we suggest that self-study of teacher education is more likely to contribute to effective teacher educator professional development than accountability measures from the outside. Self-study provides a means for teacher educators to focus on their teaching practice and consider ways of enhancing student learning (Loughran

2002). It has a strongly reflective aspect to it but also involves the support of critical friends. Critical friends can be students or they can be colleagues engaged in enhancing their own teaching. Colleagues often observe each other's lessons and then provide valuable feedback (Pressick-Kilborn and te Riele 2007, in press) to the observed practitioner. Loughran suggests that for teacher educators, 'In collaborating, the perspectives and practices of their individual and collective selves [become] important avenues for creating new possibilities for learning'. He goes on to note that reflection on practice can result in mere rationalisation of that practice. He affirms the importance of collaboration in 'catalyzing reframing in ways that dramatically diminish the likelihood of such rationalization.' (2006, 172).

It has long been asserted that sustained professional learning requires prolonged engagement in professional conversations (e.g. Feiman-Nemser 2001). This is difficult to achieve in most workplaces but is typically associated with communities of learners variously described as: knowledge building communities (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1993); communities of practice (Wenger 1998); and professional learning communities (Feiman-Nemser 2001). Many features of professional learning communities have been identified (Aubusson et al. 2007; Bereiter and Scardamalia 1993; Erickson, Farr Darling and Clark 2005; Wenger 1998). Features particularly pertinent to this study include: mutual respect; risk taking; a determination to improve; and professional, progressive discourse. Creating and nourishing such a community in an education setting, somewhat ironically, has proved consistently difficult (Grossman, Wineburg and Woolworth 2001; Pomson 2005) in part because the act of teaching is often characterised by isolation (Connelly and Clandinin 1995; Pomson 2005). Aubusson et al. (2007) noted that peer observation, which is an essential feature of the professional interaction in this study, may be associated with

the openness and shared sense of responsibility required for what Grossman et al. describe as a genuine community. While there has been evidence that peer observation contributes to community building it was unclear, from fifty cases studied (Aubusson et al. 2007), whether peer observation activities initiated the community formation observed or whether community was an essential precursor to peer observation.

In higher education, the assumption is either explicit or implicit that peer observation is conducted primarily for the benefit of the observed (e.g., Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004; MacKinnon 2001). Three forms of observation have been identified by Gosling (2002): judgmental where management instigates observation to evaluate the quality of teaching; developmental where senior staff observe others to provide advice on how to improve; and equal–mutual or reciprocal-reflective where peers observe each other over extended periods and engage in learning conversations. ‘The strength of this type of observation [with focused feedback]’, according to Smith (2003, 213), ‘is that the purpose is mutual professional development and not an examination of professional competence for summative evaluation purposes’. Doubt has been cast on the merits of peer observation with feedback alone as a strategy for improvement (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2005) particularly when associated with quality assurance and credentialing supervision. However, they argue that with conversation it provides ‘a vehicle for encouraging academics to develop their reflective thinking about their role as professional lecturers, and to seek and engage in developmental processes as a result’ (222-223).

The focus of the above studies tends to be on the learning and reframing experienced by the observed teacher educator. Our argument in this paper is that

through the act of observing and then discussing, both parties in the self-study learn and reframe their practices. We concur with Martin and Double (1998) and Smith (2003) that observing others teach is a learning experience for both the observer and the observed. Like Shakespeare's quality of mercy it is 'twice blest: it blesseth him [sic] that gives and him that takes'. Nevertheless, critical friendship is not unproblematic. Issues of trust, power, status, shared (or separate) understandings can all arise (Schuck and Segal 2002; Schuck and Russell 2005). Despite these risks, critical friendship within a cohesive learning community, and between educators who share a strong professional and, arguably, personal relationship can be a powerful device for interrogating one's own understandings of practice.

### **Design of the study**

Our methodology is located in self-study as it exhibits several of the characteristics that LaBoskey (2004) argues should be present: it is initiated by and focused on self; it is improvement-aimed; and it is interactive at one or more stages of the process (820-821). The research uses 'collective self-reflection' which provides a method to 'inquire into our own and others' teaching' (Schatz 1993, 60). It is a research and educative process where talking about experiences of the collective enables individuals to learn about themselves, others and the workings of the group (Schatz 1993). Importantly in this study it was not applied to understand the working of the group per se but rather to enable us to gain insights about the knowledge, views and ideology that underpin our teaching. Thus our method is consistent with Loughran's (1997) assertion that critical conversations (such as ours) provide a means to elucidate thinking about pedagogy embedded in teaching and learning episodes. This paper



examines how three colleagues interacted to tease out the different ways in which each approached the idea of critical friendship and professional learning.

The authors, John, Peter and Sandy, are teacher educators at an Australian university. We regularly share our thinking about our teaching and attend each other's classes. In this process we followed LaBoskey's (2006) advice by providing each other with support to articulate and rearticulate ideas, gather and debate evidence and engage in metacognition to theorise shared experiences. John's classes were the stimulus for this study because both Sandy and Peter have attended and observed some of these. The observation, as van Manen (1992) recommended, involved 'an attitude of assuming a relation that is close as possible while retaining a hermeneutic alertness to situations that allows us to constantly step back and reflect on the meaning of those situations' for us. We were 'gatherer(s) of anecdotes' of significance to us with 'a keen sense of the point or cogency that the anecdote carries within itself' (van Manen 1992, 69). The point was not always apparent at the time of collection, rather it was the task of the collective reflection to make explicit the underlying cogency that made the anecdote pertinent and salient to the observer.

***Research questions:***

- What are the essential ingredients that help us to make sense of each other's teaching?
- What challenges arise for our meaning-making of what we see?
- How does peer observation and professional dialogue inform our understanding of teaching?

Ensuing conversations among the three of us about John's teaching, our observations and our collective professional learning highlighted some differences both in our purpose in observing and in our responses to John after our observations.

These conversations took on a life of their own and became interesting for what they told us about professional learning and critical friendship. Our observations and conversations in this study had the initial goal of enhancing our practice. As a result of the conversations we shared, a complementary aim arose: to understand better the nature of professional learning as experienced through interaction and observation. We investigated aspects that took us by surprise in our observations and conversations and how we selected what to discuss and what to ignore in our learning conversations. We were also interested in examining how our personal and professional relationships affected what we said, and why we said it, in our learning conversations. As well, during one session in particular, we asked ourselves and each other ‘has this led to improvement in our teaching and how do we know if it has?’

### **Emerging reflections and themes**

The process of analysis began with capturing the data in notes on the conversations and through a series of reflections from Sandy and Peter, with responses from John. Observation notes and reflective accounts arising from the conversations were analysed to identify themes. This analysis stimulated perception of things previously unnoticed, recall of events, further discussion and resultant reflective notes. The interplay between reflections and commentary was subjected to further interpretation, reported in a commentary.

What we uncovered was not limited to our understanding of teaching, but of ourselves, each other and the rapport we have. The process enhanced and shed light on this rapport just as it did on the quality and nature of our teaching. The conversations were at times confronting, especially, as is to be expected, for John whose teaching was being observed and discussed. Still, the process was liberating

and enlightening, rather than constraining, fearful or joyless. Importantly, our professional lives overlap often and in a sufficiently rich way that holding a mirror up to one is not perceived as a threat, but as benevolence, albeit momentarily confronting. The collegial rapport we enjoy, much like any interpersonal relationship, is probably impossible to synthesise in terms of its quality and depth. It has developed over innumerable coffee conversations and other interactions, but neither coffee nor any other accoutrement of our friendships is sufficient in itself for such relationships to develop. Moreover, the indispensable nature of such a relationship to support a process which concerns the four areas identified by Day and Leitch (2001) can hardly be overstated. We are unaware of another means of exploring the multi-toned, untidy complexity of teaching, including our own teaching. The process, its habitat or environment and its products/findings are the antithesis of much of what passes for assessment of teacher quality in higher education today.

From our analysis of the professional conversations four themes seemed to determine the types of matters we chose to discuss. Specifically these included: observations and views that *challenged* our notions of good teaching; aspects of our teaching about which we had *doubts*; points of *difference* in our teaching noted in observations; and points of *similarity* in our teaching that were matters of interest or concern to the observer.

The first theme became apparent as Sandy wrote her reflections on her observations of one of John's lessons. In her reflections, Sandy wrote about the way she had felt challenged when she observed one of John's classes.

My preference is to orchestrate the learning through careful preparation of activities that can be done collaboratively in groups, and then to take a minor role in the activities as they ensue. If I were asked what good teaching looks like, I would suggest that a class of students discussing the activities with each other and making meaning of

them would approach my vision. I saw (see) my role as similar to that of a travel agent - set up the arrangements for the learning voyage and then leave it to the students to actually experience the journey. However, I was challenged by John's teaching; here was a thoughtful, passionate, highly knowledgeable and professional person teaching in ways quite unlike my preconceptions. John had a central role; he guided the discussion, presented superb resources to illustrate his discussion, and led the students from one activity to another in the role of tour guide. He showed them the sights and then led them on to the next amazing attraction. (Reflections - Sandy- Aug 07)

What became apparent when discussing these reflections was that the Sandy's reaction pertained not to John's teaching but to her own. An approach that she had held to be central in her teaching was being challenged by the successful and expert way that a colleague was teaching, a way that appeared to be in contradiction to her views. Her learning that arose out of the conversation might not appear profound to others, but to Sandy the acknowledgment, and perhaps reminder, that there are a multiplicity of approaches to teaching was an important call to reframe the way she saw teaching.

For John, Sandy's comments also proved to be a challenge. They breathed life into his doubts about his tour guide approach. For him the observations raised concerns that this approach might be positioning students more passively as learners.

... maybe I'm just modelling learning as a passive pastime. Even more naively, perhaps I just dance across the rooftops of so many different things out of a fear of being boring. I warn my students against being taken hostage by their teaching content material. Proficient teachers prepare more than is likely to be needed in a given teaching period. So, too, do many novice teachers. If this is the case, what, if anything, separates the two? In terms of motive, perhaps not a great deal. In terms of practice, though, the differences may be greater. A proficient teacher is likely to have supplementary material at her/his disposal, material that is used, or remains unused according to a variety of contingencies. A novice teacher, however, is more likely to be

determined to use and cover all the material come hell or high water. (Reflections -

John- Sept 07)

John concedes that there resides in him some of the novice alongside the experienced teacher. Because the imposter-novice disguises itself deceptively well as the expert, this might remain unidentified in a superficial diagnosis of teaching. This is not to assert that we have unlocked the key to this dynamic.

Two matters, questioning and time spent on each activity during the teaching sessions, initially dominated Peter's conversations with John and Sandy. These arose from notes taken during his observations. Peter noted that John asked some questions to which students did not respond or did not respond in any meaningful way. It seemed that these questions were not rhetorical. This was raised with John as a matter of concern to Peter. Notably Peter was uncomfortable with his own teaching when students did not respond. Peter was surprised when John explained not only that he was unconcerned but that he thought it was important that students did not feel pressured to respond and should be free to choose not to answer questions. John elaborated, extending the explanation to locate it in his views of learners' rights. Here it was clear that this was no mere 'rationalisation' (as defined by Loughran 2006) but an insight into deeply held beliefs and analysis of their implications for higher education. This was confronting for Peter because he agreed with the overarching position espoused by John. Yet, Peter had taken it as given that he had the right to press students to respond to questions because he saw student responses as a fundamental means of gathering evidence about the learning that was or was not occurring in his classes. The question-answer process was essential for iteratively informing the progress of his teaching in each session. This difference in opinion led to an argument among John, Sandy and Peter about the relative merits of our differing views and practices.

Peter also noted that John used many varied resources and activities in his classes but suggested that the activities were not exploited to their full potential. In particular a role-play that had obviously taken John a long time to develop with students was conducted carefully with ample time to provide the intended experience of a clash of cultures but it was only discussed briefly. Again it is noteworthy that this is a matter of interest to Peter in his teaching, in part because role-play is a research interest. Primarily it drew his attention because he is often aware that, in the interest of approaching issues and ideas in many different ways, he often does not extract the full learning worth of some activities he has designed with such care. The extent to which activities were used was not a matter of concern to Peter until he observed the same phenomenon in John's class. John's reasoning for working as he did was identical to Peter's, namely, that offering a range of resources and activities provides opportunities for students to engage and work with ideas in different ways. Significantly, it seemed that Peter needed to observe and hear the reasoning espoused by John, by another, in order to reconsider and doubt it. As a consequence, he decided that he was dissatisfied both with this shared practice and unconvinced by the explanation. Thus, he resolved to interrogate this further by taking action in his own classes to use fewer activities in upcoming sessions and invest more time in each to see how this influences learning by his students.

... the observation of John was ... not about John but 'all about me'. I homed in [during my observations and initial discussions] on areas of concern and disturbance in my own teaching rather than John's. This ... resulted in a long-term professional dialogue about my teaching and my understanding of my teaching and the implications for learning. ... including, probably unfounded consternation about silences in my classes and my perceived ineptitude in not wringing every drop of analysis, reflection and thinking from every resource and activity. (Reflections- Peter- Aug 2007)

Significantly, the process of observing John led Peter to engage in critical reflection and discussion about aspects of his teaching about which he was concerned. The discussion extended over many meetings with Sandy and John over the following weeks as each expressed their view and invited the others to provide reasons for teaching as they did. The ongoing conversation has not resolved issues. It has provided a forum to raise and scrutinise like and unlike views. In no case did it result in a determination about what was best or better but it did lead to a determination to vary teaching in future to test out alternative ways of doing things. It promoted uncertainty so that even where there may not have been a strong conviction that an alternative was better there emerged a willingness to try and see.

### **Discussion and Implications**

We return to our questions posed earlier in this paper and consider what this process has told us about them.

We have argued in this paper that the most essential ingredient for making sense of our teaching, or indeed, for any teacher educators who wish to learn from each other, is the pre-existence of a robust professional and personal relationship. What makes these peer observations and subsequent learning conversations valuable for our professional development is their acknowledgement of the cognitive-emotional and personal-professional aspects of teaching (Day and Leitch, 2001). Without the ingredients that address the emotional and personal as well as the cognitive and professional components, the ability to be open to challenges to our thinking about teaching would be diminished. The elements of trust, openness, friendship and vulnerability we share in our professional relationships, enable us to surface our doubts, and discuss the challenges that we encounter in our practice.

As noted earlier, our challenges to our learning from these conversations may arise from the similarity in perspectives that we have. However, we believe that more is gained from our understanding of each other's mindsets and familiarity with each other's work and contexts, than is lost through missing some shared assumptions. The equal, and mutually reflective experience that Gosling (2002) notes is the one that operates here. This experience challenges our taken-for-granted practices. The supportive yet simultaneously challenging conversations enable us to delve deeply into these practices.

A second challenge for our meaning-making is also, paradoxically, the essential ingredient discussed above. Our respect for each other as teacher educators, and an unwillingness to jeopardise our relationships with each other might prevent us from asking probing questions which might strike at the core of a colleague's values and beliefs. While the relationship may enable us to be more open to questioning our own practices, challenging each other's practices has more at stake in the emotional and personal dimensions. The trust in each other must not be born of blind acceptance, as this process demands that we confront each other to make sense of our practice, thus providing frames of reference for us to see things differently. We argue that this challenge exists in any critical friendship and is more likely to be overcome where the relationship has the robustness discussed above.

Our third question concerns the learning that may develop from the peer observations and professional learning conversation process that we describe here. Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of this process is that it positions us as learners, or perhaps more bluntly, 'paints us into the learner's corner'. One of the professional hazards of teaching is that we become accustomed to and seduced by the appearance of having the greatest knowledge, or at least the most valuable knowledge in the



room. The learner's corner can seem a lonely place. Parading one's pedagogical wares before a colleague is potentially a confronting experience that requires a measure of confidence and reciprocal trust.

The egalitarian nature of our interactions did not prevent us from making judgments about the goodness and badness of events; judgments about what to note; what captured attention; and what matters to raise in conversations. Interestingly these judgments were more often turned on oneself as observer than on the other - the observed. Thus we tended to derive evaluations of ourselves as teacher rather than of one of the others. The resounding emphasis in our process was peer observation and conversation among equals contributing to improvement through deeper understanding of the act of teaching. Each experienced teacher has a great deal of tacit knowledge, and, as often happens, the impetus to question practice fades with time, to be replaced by an unthinking repertoire. The learning conversations of the sort described here, forced us to re-examine that tacit knowledge and question the ways we have been doing things.

Our conversations highlighted the different purposes and perspectives with which we initially approached the observations. Sandy came to John's classes to learn about her own teaching, to provide a stimulus for discussion about teaching in general, to gain opportunities to consider different approaches and styles and to refresh her thinking about her own practice by gaining new perspectives. Peter came to the classes, initially to provide support and data as observations but with few well thought out guiding principles other than 'to be true'. John invited the other two so that he could obtain some expert perspectives on the qualities and shortcomings of his teaching.

The conversations indicated that we each had a position on teaching that we were bringing to our observations or implementation of the lessons. We were judging what occurred in the classroom, not as a measure of its success in that context, but in terms of how it fitted with our position and what it told us about our teaching. As a result of the conversations, Peter and Sandy questioned why certain aspects of John's classes had challenged one of us but not the other. For example, why had the way that John implemented questioning techniques not been something that Sandy wanted to think further about, given the challenge it provided Peter? Was it because Sandy was satisfied with her questioning techniques or was it because this was not something she had thought deeply about? Questions like these forced us all to rethink the taken-for-granted in our teaching.

The process was consistent with the comments of Loughran (2006) who argued that conversations about teaching may wallow at mere rationalisation. Initially there were many of the discomforts and difficulties identified in critical friendships by Schuck and Russell (2005) in raising concerns. This quickly evolved into a pursuit of ideas and underlying principles.

The conversations were prolonged and frequent, a feature of productive professional learning noted by Feiman-Nemser (2001). Often an issue would be discussed one day and the response considered in later, individual reflection only to be raised for further discussion some days later. Thus features of the interaction that helped to move the conversations beyond rationalisation were: provocative questions driven by genuine inquiry; a shared quest for knowledge with a willingness to clarify perceptions for others; security born of mutual respect; and prolonged engagement with ideas that mattered to us.

Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2005) discuss the relative merits of close and distant colleagues doing peer observation. The participants in this study have much common ground in their views of teaching and are very well known to each other. To some extent this made the frank exchanges possible. It is difficult to know, however, what we missed in understanding each other's teaching, simply because we thought its *raison d'être* was self evident, or what we failed to question because to us it seemed trivial. It would be informative to extend the process to include others with more divergent views of teaching and more distant professional relationships. Distance may add perspective but it may also deny access to rich open conversation. The on-going process of peer observation with professional conversation among John, Peter and Sandy as well as with others in teacher education at their university (see for example, Pressick-Kilborn and te Riele 2007 in press) has contributed to an enhanced professional learning community. On the other hand we note that the community existed prior to the start of the peer observation. We also note that while staff from outside this community have observed lessons taught by some members of this community, the process has not been reciprocal and the observers have not contributed to the ongoing professional conversations. Rather there was observation followed by feedback-dominated conversations. Further research is required but this study supports the findings of Aubusson et al. (2007), that peer observation may contribute to community building, but the mutual-reflective process is unlikely to be initiated in the absence of an existing community or of itself initiate such a community.

In our study, the critical reflection predicted by Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2005) and seen by these researchers as an ideal outcome of the process, did not arise from the peer observation alone, but from the professional conversations

associated with these observations. While we acknowledge critical reflection as a worthy end in itself, there remains some concern about the extent to which the process has improved our actual practice. While we understand our own and each other's teaching better, it is not yet evident that the way we teach has changed. We may have the means to an end but the end is yet to be realised.

## **Conclusion**

This paper discusses a process for professional learning and development of teacher educators, focusing on the value of the peer observation and ensuing conversations for learning.

For teacher educators, self-study of practices can be challenging or it can simply be a way of rationalising existing practices. For the process to enable learning, the place of the 'other' is critical (Bullough and Pinnegar 2001; Lighthall 2004). We argue that the contribution of this role is not merely in what the critical friend offers to the observed teacher, but rather, lies in the opportunity for discussion that probes assumptions of all concerned, challenges views of what good teaching looks like, and enables analysis of the practices of all concerned. An understanding of the complexity of the factors that made this process work for us will inevitably be partial, yet critical factors would seem to include: willingness to take risks; respect for one another's expertise in teaching; and ability to reflect collaboratively on our teaching and learning. The strength of the process is difficult to quantify and lies in our acknowledgment of its complexity; it cannot be reduced to a checklist of critical factors. We are reminded by the process of how intensely personal is professional learning.

This study corroborates Martin and Double's (1998) assertion that observing others teach is a learning experience for both observer and observed. The peer observation lays down an essential, shared concrete experience as a springboard for professional conversation. The theories we each hold are given expression in our teaching actions. In seeing these, we are given windows to catch a glance of each other's teaching persona and teaching deliberations. The observed actions prompt us to ask 'why?' and what each of us chooses to focus on often surprises the other. Importantly for both the observed and observer it promotes the doubt, uncertainty and dissatisfaction with the status quo that is essential for learning and change.

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