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# STARS AND SAINTS: PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS FOR ENHANCING CLASSROOM PRACTICES

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*Teaching is a complex and nuanced activity, constantly influenced by context and content, moderated through the thousands of interactions of teacher and taught. Against this demanding backdrop, can there be a meaningful professional (chartered) status that carries weight and recognises true expertise ... or is it inevitable that it becomes an unwelcome administrative burden adding to an already overly demanding workload? (McFarlane 2016: 1)*

This paper explores a reflective activity – *professional conversation* – that may help to address the problem outlined above that was stated in the last issue of *Education Today*. In so doing, it recalls the recent experience of working alongside ‘starring’ teachers who are dedicated to serving the poor in areas of deprivation. And this recollection is framed around the advice of saints – secular, religious and philosophical.

In the world of education we are familiar with the advice of secular saints Lawrence Stenhouse and Donald Schon who have told us about the importance of combining reflection with practice in the art of teaching. Perhaps we are less familiar that centuries earlier, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Doctor of the Universal Church, and patron saint of universities, told us a similar tale:

Teaching, says Thomas, is one of the highest manifestations of the life of the mind, for the reason that in teaching the *vita contempliva* and the *vita activa* are ... united in a natural and necessary union. (Pieper 1966).

However, as McFarlane (2016) rightly states above, whilst all teachers will agree that contemplation and action – or reflection and practice – are necessary for teaching, who finds time for contemplation? How might it be possible to secure time for reflection in the everyday busyness of modern day teaching?

Well, the beginnings of a possible answer lie in the past ... not the dim, distant past of Saint Thomas Aquinas, but the relatively recent past of autumn 2003. Sitting in the staffroom of Montrose Academy, a not untypical Scottish comprehensive secondary school, I had the privilege of being

regaled by a teacher of English – in his mid-50s – who was enthusing about the pilot Chartered Teacher course he was undertaking with the University of West Scotland. I was enthralled by the evidence he cited of changes in his classroom practices and the new knowledge he was gaining. I remember thinking that, “I don’t really need to go in to your class for evidence about this; it is written all over your face, and the way in which you speak.”

This experience was brought back to mind in spring 2015 when I was participating in a follow-up seminar to the University of Edinburgh conference *Into the Light: Practitioner Enquiry*. An officer from the General Teaching Council Scotland caught my attention when she spoke of the “profound impact” made upon her by the (recently disbanded) Chartered Teacher scheme. It was evident to her that the scholarship and research undertaken by Chartered Teachers had wrought great change in their classroom practices. Indeed, she was so moved that, in response, she undertook self-same scholarship and research. The power of conversation/dialogue between professionals was being manifested before my eyes; but it had yet to fully register.

This ‘registration process’ came to completion in summer 2015 when I undertook a research consultancy

project for the Adastra Primary Partnership. ‘Ad Astra’ (To the Stars) is a partnership of seven Nottinghamshire schools united by common bonds of addressing poverty and being situated in, primarily, former mining villages and towns. The Adastra Primary Partnership has identified five areas of child poverty, i.e.

- material;
- emotional;
- language;
- experience; and
- aspiration.

Each of the schools is tackling these issues of poverty in its own way; and the aim of the research consultancy project is to give the schools a ‘snapshot’ of progress being made. At the outset, the main research instruments were to be school documentation and interviews with staff.

But all was not well. To begin with, I was impressed by the ‘star quality’ of the teachers whom I interviewed about their current classroom practices. Their creativity, honesty and desire to help their children shone through. Notably, though, some teachers voluntarily and informally disclosed their apprehension about being ‘interviewed’. The very word ‘interview’ has negative connotations. This negativity was corroborated by a deputy head teacher

of one of the schools who pointed out that when a list of interviews (for a different research project) was ‘published’ on the staffroom noticeboard, several members of staff expressed disquiet at the prospect of being ‘interviewed.’ This led me to re-think both the terminology and the research approach being adopted: might there be a better way?

### What counts as research?

My first line of thought was regarding terminology – that the term ‘interview’ might express a power imbalance. The person conducting the interview seems to be in charge, with the corollary being that the interviewee/teacher is, to some extent, power-less. This may be true with a structured or semi-structured interview as the interviewer determines the questions; but not with an unstructured interview, surely? The second line of thought was more to do with the approach itself. This led me to peruse a draft paper by Lawrence Stenhouse (December 1980) that is available from University of East Anglia Centre for Applied Research in Education. Stenhouse concludes that

... two points seem to me clear: first, teachers must inevitably be intimately involved in the research process; and second, *researchers must justify themselves to practitioners, not practitioners to researchers* (emphasis added).

This emphasis on practice over and above research brought to mind three of my friends and their antipathy towards research. Like me, they are recently retired teachers (or close to retirement). They have had long, successful careers in teaching, i.e. secondary school acting head teacher; primary school head teacher; secondary school head of department. Their interest in research can be summed up in one word: “Zilch.” My interest in research is treated with a bemused tolerance. And yet, and yet ... if one is to gauge their interest in talking about teaching, then it is “High.” Sometimes in the changing room before Friday evening football,

the conversation will turn to events in a classroom that day, or to happenings in school earlier in the week. And, sometimes, such chat takes place after the football – in the pub. Be it the changing room or the pub: the conversations are characterised by honesty. Each and all are aware that the other has dedicated his life to teaching – it truly has been a vocation. Their passion for teaching has been well spent and rewarded. And for this each person’s view commands respect.

The conversations are characterised by empathy – we all know what it is like to have a rough day – a rough week indeed – when many of our good intentions and plans go awry. And although this empathy is expressed in a rough-handed manner – it is nonetheless, genuine and heartfelt. We have fellowship with one another. And because we have fellowship, we are open to – and receive – constructive criticism from our friends. Empathy, respect, critique: if ‘researchers must justify themselves to practitioners’ then their research should embrace empathy, respect and critique.

And my friends are in good company. A philosophical saint, Aristotle, knows a thing or two about education – having written about *phronesis, techne, poiesis, praxis*. In the *Nichomachean Ethics* he writes:

The person with understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected; but rather, as one united by a specific bond with the other, thinks with the other and undergoes the situation with the other. (Bernstein 1983:147).

To gain genuine understanding then, researchers need to establish a bond with teachers. In some sense, they need to accompany the teachers on their journeys. This seems to be the antithesis of the disinterested objective researcher who prizes neutrality. Rather, there needs to be a bond, empathy, and fellowship between researcher and teacher. This raises important points.

The disinterested, objective researcher is in pursuit of knowledge – and this is exemplified through the writing of journal papers and academic books. But in the busyness of modern-day teaching, which teachers have the time to read such papers and books? Indeed, the first recommendation made to the Adastra Primary Partnership was:

Each school to set aside time from staff meetings for a Book Review Club in which staff quite simply discuss and share their thoughts regarding a book review. There is no expectation that any work should arise from these readings. (Luby 2016:23)

This recommendation was made in the realisation that it is more realistic to allow staff the time to read two-page book reviews than it is to believe they can find the time to read journal papers. But herein lies a deeper message.

### Research as transformation

In May 2010 at a committee meeting of the Association of Chartered Teachers Scotland,

... a senior manager from one of the Scottish universities pointed out that the dissertations and reports produced by chartered teachers remain in a locked cupboard and are not even available in the university library. Further discussion revealed that this experience is not unique although the most common practice appears to be that dissertations are placed in the reference section of the university library. (Luby 2010:12)

Even when teachers make the time to undertake research, their subsequent reports appear to have little impact: glaringly so in the above example. But this appearance may be an illusion. The tasks of undertaking research and writing up the findings have profound impacts upon the teachers themselves. The GTCS officer attests to this – and from many conversations

with fellow Chartered Teachers, so do I. From the perspective of teachers, the relationship between research and teaching is not merely acquisition and application of knowledge – rather it is transformation. As expressed by Richard Pring (2000:14),

... education refers to that learning which in some way *transforms* (emphasis added) how people see and value things, how they understand and make sense of experience, how they can identify and solve key problems ... people become, in an important sense, different persons.

The Chartered Teachers with whom the GTCS officer spoke, and the Chartered Teacher colleagues with whom I conversed, they had all become different persons.

This view of research as transformation is also found outside of the discipline of education. Angela Brew undertook a study with senior researchers in Australia who had been conducting research for a number of years, and who were distinguished by their achievements in attaining large research grants and producing high numbers of publications. These senior researchers were drawn from the disciplines of ‘humanities,’ ‘science and technology’ and ‘social sciences.’ From her study with these senior researchers in Australia, Brew (2001:25) identified four modes of researchers’ thinking with regard to research – of which the last is “research is interpreted as a personal journey of discovery, possibly leading to transformation.”

### Dialogue capturing the process of transformation

At first glance, capturing such a process of transformation may not appear straightforward. This transformative process involves much tacit, implicit and experiential knowledge and, as Sharples (2013), points out:

It is important to remember that there is a huge amount of experiential knowledge that is not captured by research....

Indeed. Just thinking again of my three teacher friends – they have 100 years of experiential knowledge and, to the best of my knowledge, none of it has been captured by research. But they can certainly talk about their processes of transformation from beginning teachers to experienced, successful teachers. And talk – conversation, dialogue – provides a key to unlocking and capturing this process of transformation.

Referring to the work of Gilroy (1993), Lieberman & Miller (2001) and Richardson (1997); Tillema and Orland-Barak (2006:594) discuss a reflective view on the nature of professional knowledge and knowing which

... regards professionals’ construction of shared knowledge as an exchange of individual personal, implicit knowledge that becomes explicit (less tacit) through social exchange and dialogue thus distributed as professional knowledge.

And, certainly, this is the case with my teacher friends. Albeit the distribution of professional knowledge is interspersed with ribald comments emanating from the changing room – nonetheless, professional knowledge is exchanged. For 25 years we have supped Friday night ale in the pub; kicked a football – and sometimes each other! When we speak with each other of teaching, there is no attempt at pretence – it doesn’t work. We are honest with each other. And through honest dialogue, we grow ... we are transformed.

And this honest dialogue may provide a solution to a problem identified in the previous issue of *Education Today*. In this issue McFarlane (2016:1) rightly acclaims that:

On 8 June 2016 the Privy Council granted a supplemental charter

to the College of Teachers. This marked a major milestone in the professionalisation of teaching as it grants the power to create a true Chartered Status for teachers.

Undoubtedly, attaining Chartered Teacher status will be a worthwhile and challenging endeavour. Indeed, like the Scottish experience, it should be transformative (Luby, 2010). However, according to both Campbell (2016) and Cordingley & Goodwyn (2016), a workable accreditation system for assessing the award of chartered teacher status will need to be devised. Given high levels of teacher workload and lack of time for reflection, then teachers’ preference for dialogue may provide a means for determining professional knowledge concomitant with such an award. Such dialogue may take the form of a professional conversation.

### Models of professional conversation

Professional conversations are “discussions among those who share a complex task or profession in order to improve their understanding ... and efficacy in what they do” (Britt *et al.*, 2001: 31). In terms of the actual form that they take, Leonard (2012) reports on the Australian model of using professional conversations with mentor teachers and beginning teachers. These professional conversations comprise semi-structured interviews using ‘prompts’ that are provided in the form of questions for both mentor teachers and beginning teachers; the questions are based on the Australian National Standards for Teachers. There is some appeal with this model of professional conversation given that there is a mentor-mentee relationship and reference to national standards. Both this relationship and national standards (Scottish Government, 2009) were important features of the Scottish system of awarding chartered teacher status. Presumably, these will feature too in any system devised by the Chartered College of Teaching. However, one needs to take cognisance of the disquiet expressed above by teachers, voluntarily, with regard to

participating in an ‘interview’. Also, the teachers in the Australian model are early career whilst Chartered Teacher status, most likely, will be awarded to experienced teachers.

A different, more promising route to an appropriate model of professional conversation is suggested by Beavan (2013). Drawing upon the work of Schuck *et al.* (2008), Beavan contends that, “In professional conversations, the interlocutor attempts to move the conversation beyond merely providing a rationalisation of the current practice by asking provocative questions or seeking clarification...”. This calls to mind the work of Mercer with regard to developing dialogic skills. Mercer (1995:104) identifies both *cumulative talk* that “... build[s] positively but uncritically on what the other has said”; and *exploratory talk* in which the participants “... engage critically but constructively with each other’s ideas.” Not only does the consensus required for cumulative talk resonate with the respect and empathy spoken of above, but also it helps to build a mentor-mentee relationship. Furthermore, through this consensual approach of cumulative talk, both mentor and mentee can address implicit, tacit and experiential knowledge. According to Mercer (1995:104), such discourse is “... characterized by repetitions, confirmations and elaborations.” Figure 1 below demonstrates an example

**Figure 1**  
**Cumulative talk (consensus)**

Researcher: “Oh, really, lesson study then” [*repeats*]; “so you’re working in threes...”

Teacher: “Yeah, right” [*confirms*]; “what we did was...” [*elaborates*]

Researcher: “That’s interesting; great. Back in the late Eighties we called it Enterprise Learning and when we worked in threes what we did was...” [*elaborates*]

Teacher: “Really? That’s more like action research then; isn’t it?” [*confirms*]

from the recent research consultancy project with the Adastra Primary Partnership (Luby 2016).

Exploratory talk is characterised by statements and suggestions being offered for joint consideration and these may be challenged and counter-challenged, but challenges are justified and alternative hypotheses are offered (Mercer, 1995) – an example is outlined below in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
**Exploratory talk (constructive criticism)**

Teacher: “Don’t you think, though, that our form of lesson study is better because it is less threatening?” [*joint consideration*]

Researcher: “I have to disagree. I reckon that it (Enterprise Learning) gave us a more systematic approach, more rigorous understanding about our teaching and learning” [*challenge and justification*] “Might it not be better if you adopted this approach in your school?” [*alternative hypothesis*]

Teacher: “I can see where you’re coming from; but I don’t think that this would work in our school context because...” [*elaborates; counter-challenges*]

It is possible to envisage a model of professional conversation - whereby a mentor and mentee engaged with the transformative process of attaining Chartered Teacher status – employ the dialogic skills of cumulative talk and exploratory talk. Figure 3 below depicts a fictional example.

**Figure 3**  
**CTeach status**

Mentor: “And, so, tell me again; where did that idea come from?” [*repetition – consensus*]

CTeach candidate: “Well, remember when you recommended that I read Alex Moore’s *Teaching and Learning: Pedagogy, Curriculum and Culture?*” [*joint consideration – exploratory*]

Mentor: “Uh huh.” [*confirmation – consensus*]

CTeach candidate: “I found his discussion of Bruner’s work to be really helpful”.

Mentor: “In what way?” [*challenge – exploratory*]

CTeach candidate: “Well, it was the bit where he talked about spiralling.”

Mentor: “What do you mean by that?” [*challenge – exploratory*]

CTeach candidate: “Well, it’s this idea of continually going back to previous learning following on from new learning and new experience. This new stuff makes you re-think old concepts and understandings...” [*elaboration – consensus*]

Mentor: “So, the old ideas and concepts are no longer valuable.” [*challenge – exploratory*]

CTeach candidate: “Oh no; I disagree.” [*counter-challenge – exploratory*] “It was the old concepts about behaviourism and curriculum design – you know, Skinner – that helped me better understand Bruner.” [*justification – exploratory*] “And, I mean, that tribute thing to Vic Kelly. What was it? ‘Curriculum arguments from 35 years ago are still relevant today.’ That’s so true.”

There is some richness with this conversation and suggestions of growth in the mentee’s professional knowledge. Of course, it is difficult to avoid the criticism of “Schon’s... distinction between ‘espoused theory’ [what teachers say they do] and ‘theory in action’ [what they actually and observably do]...” (Cordingley & Goodwyn, 2016: 26). Nonetheless,

heeding the advice of Hill (2008: 92) to "... develop the transcript as a negotiated, annotated document ... [should] ensure the researcher's interpretations are grounded in the actual lived experience."

When contemplating accreditation for the award of Chartered Teacher status, the Chartered College of Teaching may wish to consider the use of professional conversations that are directed towards the dialogic skills of cumulative talk and exploratory talk. Teachers welcome an opportunity to talk about their craft, but these opportunities are, sadly, too rare. But an empathetic, honest conversation can reveal much of the tacit, implicit beliefs and practices that underpin classroom teaching in today's busy world. And through recording, transcription and negotiated annotation, such dialogue may merit consideration as a means to attain the professional award of Chartered Teacher status.

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