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Creating spaces for critical transformative dialogues: Legitimising discussion groups as professional practice

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Abstract: Focussed dialogue (as lived and living practices) can have a powerful role in renewing professional practice, advancing its sustainability and development as administrative and political systems colonise the practices of teachers and teacher educators. However, participating in discussion groups for many teachers, including those in academia, is often constrained by time demands, workplace structures and accountabilities. This paper reports a two year empirical case study investigating the transformative nature of dialogues experienced in one such focused discussion group. The dialogic practices of the group aimed firstly to provide a communicative space for its participants to interrogate and interpret factors which enable and constrain teaching and research practices; secondly, to critique practices as a form of collective professional learning; and thirdly, to study the educational practices of its members from within their own practice tradition. To do this it describes the nature of discussion groups. Findings reveal that creating communicative space for discussion enables professional learning and agency through critical and transformative dialogues.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is to demonstrate the transformative nature of dialogues encountered by a group of educators who have been meeting regularly as a counter response to the succumbing to challenges and issues arising from the broader administrative and political contexts influencing the nature and efficacy of their practice. At the same time as education faces a world-wide shift in policy agendas which position education as globalised, technologised and innovative, education is now being dominated by administrative directions that force its members into a realm of efficiency, standards, accountability and measurability. The economy of 'performativity' (Lyotard 1984) and 'managerial professionalism' (Sachs 2003) are now becoming entrenched within the neo-liberal discourse and consciousness of educational policy and administration signalling new complexities in the everyday happenings or *lived* and *living practices* of academics.

As administrative and political systems colonise the *lifeworld* (Habermas 1987) of educators, educational practices of teaching and research become charged with complex socio-political ideologies and agendas. Given this situation, many in education have experienced both loss of agency and solidarity in their everyday lives as teachers and academics (Edwards-Groves et al 2010). For many, this has seen the development of an 'audit culture' (Strathern 2000) whereby the researching and teaching practices of teacher educators are often constrained or even obstructed by instrumentalist and measurement polices which bear down on the academic freedoms enjoyed in past times. The consequences of this include

emptying higher education of its moral and social purposes – not simply as 'values' that 'lie behind' the education offered in teacher education programs, but

as lived and *living practices* that model and secure education itself – practices that are the promised *sine qua non* of education. (Edwards-Groves et al 2010, p. 52)

Being able to recognise and name factors which enable and constrain practice is one step towards improving higher education practices (Hardy 2010a). Other research has reported on the nature of the conditions for professional practice in academia (see for example, Ax and Ponte 2010; Brand and Ruskin 2007; Edwards-Groves et al 2010; Hardy 2010b) and the development of groups as communities of practice (see for example, Monaghan and Columbaro 2009; Wenger 1998). Communities of practice, as a term, is becoming a recognisable and prolific way of describing the collective formation of people who not only share, but are driven by, a concern or a passion for something they do, and as they interact with each other, learn how to do it better. In this they regularly engage in what is described as a process of collective learning within a shared domain of human endeavour (for instance, teachers learning a new curriculum in a school or a group of academics learning to use on-line forums) (Wenger, 1998).

This paper, however, examines these practices through a different theoretical-empirical lens. It enters this different territory, specifically by focusing on the interactive practices of a number of teacher educators who have formed themselves as a group seeking to understand and respond to the effects of living within a culture of auditing and management. The paper centres on how the practice of interacting with colleagues through focused analytic dialogues develops groups as social projects (Schatzki 2002) which both supports and transforms practice itself. This is an important issue for education where new neo-liberal levels of performance, measurability and accountability form new complexities for its inhabitants (educators at all levels). In this there is a great need to heed Habermas' caution (1987);

if education loses sight of these 'in practice' day-to-day interactions and relationships and becomes subsumed under the medium of political and administrative action, an abstract face of education will be produced and experienced. The abstractness consists in the fact that the norms of school law apply without consideration of the persons concerned, of their needs and interests, cutting off their experiences and splitting up their life relationships, and this has to endanger the pedagogical freedom and initiative of the teacher. (Habermas, 1987, p. 317)

Similarly to groups reported elsewhere (see eg Bass, Anderson-Patton and Allender 2002; Dalmau and Gudjonsdottir 2002; Louie, Stackman, Drevdahl and Purdy 2002; Olser and Flack 2002; Greene, Kim and Marioni 2007), the educators at the centre of the research presented in this paper created a group which aimed to embrace and respond to the complexities and contestations of these forces through robust reflexive discussions. In meeting together, through a process of action research, members created a communicative space for focused and analytic discussion about shared matters of common concern, and in one way might be described as a community of practice (Wenger 1998). Members engaged in 'collaborative analytic dialogues' (Edwards-Groves 1998, 2003) as an act of collegiality and as a form of collaborative inquiry and reflection which aimed to understand and transform practice. The dialogic practices of the group aimed firstly, to provide a communicative space to interrogate, interpret and comprehend those factors which enable and constrain teaching and research practices; secondly, to critique practices as a form of professional learning; and thirdly, and more broadly, to study the educational practices of its members from within their own practice tradition, as a form of collective self-reflective enquiry (Carr and Kemmis 1986).

The purpose of this paper therefore, is to understand the nature of the development, enactment and transformation practices of the group which came together under what they perceived as challenging circumstances for contemporary higher education. The fundamental

rationale of the paper rests with the notion that in any educational circumstances, the social-political relationships between members of groups (students and teachers in classrooms, or teacher educators in a faculty) is always accomplished discursively in language and interactions as they encounter one another in intersubjective spaces (Kemmis et al 2014). It is the nature of these intersubjective spaces which is the focus of the paper and whether these spaces enable and constrain the practices of individuals the group within and beyond the group itself.

The Context of the Study

The two-year action research was conducted with a group of university educators, working across several courses in a regional university in Australia. In this study, members of the *Teacher Talk* group (see also Hardy 2010a), met regularly out of an initial desire to understand and respond to academic practice in their local context; in particular to discuss how changing conditions in their workplace influenced teaching and research practices. Underpinning the initial development of the group was the shared concern about the impact of new management and measurement regimes they encountered at the university. As in the Greene, Kim and Marioni study (2007) it was decided to record and transcribe the meetings for research purposes and so all members acted as participant researchers (including the author). All members had access to the transcripts which for the group served three distinct purposes. Firstly, transcripts served as a springboard for reflection for participants between meetings. Secondly, they served as texts around which members conducted focused analytic dialogue in subsequent meetings. Thirdly, the transcripts provided empirical data for researching practice and scholarly writing. It is aimed findings may influence educational administration bodies (including school and university systems) to validate discussion groups as professional work, and to perhaps 'design-in' more such opportunities as a strategic approach for renewing, sustaining and advancing professional practice.

Group Practices as Social Projects

In this paper, practice is viewed as *situated* in the particular circumstances and conditions of particular site ontologies (Schatzki 2002). From this perspective, practices take form in, and are formed by 'the site of the social' (Schatzki 2002). They come into being through the interconnected web of *sayings*, *doings* and *relatings* (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008) enacted by the members of the site in particular purposeful 'social projects' (or teleoaffective ends and tasks) which are constituted by distinctive practices which give it its meaning and coherence (Schatzki 2002). These sayings, doings and relatings (described as 'practice architectures' by Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008) 'hang together' in practices and are the particular cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political arrangements that prefigure and shape the conduct of practice. Practice architectures shape the distinctive 'sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings' characteristic of a particular practice and give practices like teacher education and professional learning,

- their *meaning* and *comprehensibility* (through *sayings* in the cultural-discursive dimension, in semantic space, and in the medium of language),
- their *productiveness* (the *doings* in the material-economic dimension, in physical space-time, and in the medium of work or activity), and
- their value in establishing *solidarity* among the people involved in and affected by a practice of a particular kind (through *relatings* in the social-political dimension, in social space, and in the medium of power) (adapted from Kemmis and Grootenboer

2008).

These dimensions of practice are mutually forming and informing of practices constituting one kind of practice or another. Educators who come together in discussion groups, such as those reported in this paper, come together in intersubjective spaces as *co-habitants* of the sites and practices they mutually create through particular relational architectures (Edwards-Groves et al, 2010). The intersubjective dimensions of a group's practices – enacted in their sayings, doings and relatings – are coherent and comprehensible to each other as they meet one another in interactions. Furthermore, in taking Schatzki's position we learn their practices are in interdependent relationships with others, not only in terms of maintaining their own being and identities, but also *in and through their practices* in social projects (the dialogic practices of the group in meetings in this instance). Therefore, the notion of 'projects' (Schatzki 2002) is especially helpful in determining what might *count* as a practice as its character as a *project* gives the practice of being a group its distinctiveness and purpose. Of interest in particular in this paper is how members of groups mutually construct their practice; that is, how group practices unfold in action (doings) and interaction (relatings) as moment-by-moment interchanges (sayings) which are comprehensible by the group.

Discussion Groups as 'Living Practice'

Talk encountered in discussion groups is characteristically discursive, iterative and dialogical as productive collaborative conversations build 'collective knowledge' through the sharing of experiences (Gergen 1985; Hardy 2010; Wenger 1998) as a form of intersubjective meaning-making (Hardy 2010b). More importantly, group dialogic practices demonstrate a form of communicative action (Habermas 1996) where meaning is never frozen or terminated, but remains in a continuous state of becoming (Gergen, McNamee and Barrett 2001). Therefore group practices are never static or in a state of completeness but rather exist as discursive, living practices,

> unfolding in a continuous present, shaped by often unseen hands and habits inherited from the past. It is more or less intensely present to us in our consciousness. We 'flow' in it in ways guided by our experience, correcting an imbalance here and recovering from a hesitation or mistake there, as the action unfolds and as we ourselves unfold as living, conscious beings present in and with our practices. (Kemmis 2009)

The sense of the 'here-and-now-*ness*,' the 'happening-*ness*' and the 'lived-*ness*' of practice in real life are what enable the practices of discussion groups as having inherent value to education. Group practices develop through participating. Group practices –as kinds of social projects - generate their own distinctive character and their own distinctive set of social-political arrangements or relational architectures (Edwards-Groves et al 2010) unfolding in the moment-by-moment aspects of the talk. It is the "social interaction [which] is the primordial means through which the business of the social work is transacted, the identities of the participants are affirmed or denied, and its cultures are transmitted, renewed and modified" (Goodwin and Heritage 1990, p. 283).

In social projects members create a participatory and relational responsibility for the group (Gherardi 2008). As a guiding precept, the formation and sustainability of groups relies on a willingness to engage in honest, caring conversations about questions, issues and challenges in the context of trusting relationships (Greene et al 2007). Moreover, individuals who come together in such groups are often motivated, self-extending and praxis-oriented professionals who engage in substantive talk about the details of their profession (Edwards-Groves 2008).

Transformative Educational Practices

The transformation of practices occurs in situations; these can be less formalised or unofficial arrangements or more formally endorsed or corporate activities; and the benefits of both are hotly contested in the literature. For academics, development often takes place in locations where they spend most of their time: departments, professional settings and research sites (Boud 1999). At times it takes the form of exchanges with colleagues, interacting with students, working on issues and problems, writing and other associated practices, often occurring as peripheral participation in workplace practices where participants do not conceptualise what they are doing as learning (Boud 1999; Lave and Wenger 1991). It is often implicit and informal and not normally viewed as legitimate development or legitimate work, but as Boud suggests (1999) 'it often has a more profound influence on staff than activities explicitly labelled as such' (p. 3).

It is recognised that in order to develop an ongoing, productive, self-extending space for transformation, educators require planned opportunities to work individually and within communities of professional inquiry (Edwards-Groves 2008). The situatedness of the practice, in discussion groups in this instance, and in particular what constitutes the interactional practices in those groups is a dimension of academic learning practice not often the focus of research. How groups come into being, and the opportunities they create for themselves in the context of participating, are central. An underlying principle of this paper, therefore, is not to position the benefits of one approach against the other but to place the professional exchanges and dialogues encountered in groups under scrutiny.

Researching Practice Through 'Collaborative Transformative Dialogue'

This paper blends two action research approaches in which participants co-research and improve their practices through critical self-reflective processes, by having participants examine, analyse, interpret and critique the range of texts encountered and created in their profession. Firstly, c*ollaborative analytic dialogue* describes the processes and practices of groups of educators engaging in dialogues focusing on interrogating, interpreting and transforming current practice conditions and circumstances. It was developed as a form of intervention and platform for transformation (as in Edwards-Groves 1998) which focused on the participant interactions (represented in transcripts as 'texts'). Secondly, to develop this further, the notion of *critical transformative dialogues* (a term coined by Trede, Higgs and Rothwell 2008) draws on the concept of 'texts as dialogues' developed by Trede (2008) as a practical way of interpreting the layers of texts constructed in and through the practices and interactions of participants.

Collaborative transformative dialogue is an approach which is resolutely empirical; teachers used texts (transcribed and/or videoed lessons) to understand, reconceptualise and transform practices by engaging in four phases of dialogue:

- *reflective self dialogues* - participants engage in self observation, interrogation and critique of lesson transcripts (or videos of teaching),
- *collaborative analytic dialogues* – participants engage in critical and analytic discussions of reflections and transcripts (and/or videos) with others for the purpose of reconceptualising teaching as interactive practice and framing focused change agendas,
- *transformative dialogue and action*– participants practise new practices over time, critical engagement with new discourses with colleagues about the changes,
- *formative and reflexive dialogues* – participants re-engage in critical self-reflection,

self observation, interrogation and critique, and participate in collaborative analytic dialogues with supportive colleagues (developed from Edwards-Groves 1998, 2003).

In this research, 'texts as dialogues' consist of conversations, transcriptions and papers written by participants which serve as platforms for future interactions and analytic dialogue. It is both the texts (transcripts) as artefacts or representations of social interactions encountered in the group and the 'in real time' interactions around these texts which form the dialogues important for this study. The dialogues are not linear but are iterative and recursive in one sense as members construct, interpret and critically analyse these texts as a matter of their practical activity in the group over time. Importantly, by becoming aware of practice through critical engagement in dialogues, participants are potentially enabled to transform professional practice (Trede, Higgs and Rothwell 2008).

The Study: Participants and Methodology

This empirically-based study is drawn from a two year participatory action research project (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000) conducted in a regional university in Australia. It seeks to address these key questions: What is the nature of discussion groups? Does participation in group dialogues enable critical transformation? If so, in what ways? To address these questions, participants as co-researchers, examined their moment-by moment interactions experienced in group meetings and recorded in transcripts. Action Research is regarded as a useful research approach for understanding the situatedness of practices and, in particular, the patterns of interactions in a range of social circumstances; it shows how participants interpret and act in the social, political and cultural dimensions and orders and arrangements within their individual contexts (Heap 1985). Importantly for this study, we know the dialogue is transformative if it is shown in the talk (Frieberg and Freebody 1995).

The study involved a group of up to 13 academics (of which the author is one) from a single campus of a multi-site, regional Australian university, who assembled to form the *Teacher Talk* group to discuss the nature of the conditions and practices experienced in their context. Meetings were held approximately every six weeks over a two year period. These were held off campus, and usually in the evenings in the home of one of the members. Attendance was voluntary, and both membership and attendance were fluid with at least 5 members attending any given meeting (Note: the *Teacher Talk* group is still conducting regular meetings). Sometimes visiting international scholars were invited to the meetings to offer perspectives and insights from their own socio-political circumstances. Between meetings participants often engaged in reflective journal or scholarly writing (which sometimes were shared and critiqued in subsequent meetings; see Hardy 2009). Over the two year period, members shared responsibility for organising meetings and agenda topics (arising from both day-to-day practice issues and the transcripts).

The paper draws on an in-depth examination of a set of 14 transcripts taken from the recorded collegial discussions (representing about 40 hours of meetings). Specifically, to study the nature of the dialogues between group members and how these unfold in the moment-by-moment participant exchanges, data from audio-recorded meetings were transcribed as a record of the actual discursive production of the talk-in-interaction (Drew and Heritage 1992; Freiberg and Freebody 1995). Transcripts formed the texts representing recorded talk-in-interaction; these enabled the close and continual examination of participant's practices and afford the researcher the opportunity to elicit the intricacies of the social actions they mutually create as they engage with one another (Freebody, 2003). Transcripts of mentoring conversations (as naturally occurring data) were closely examined to elicit themes about: i) the dialogic practices (the structure and organisation), ii) how the dialogues unfolded discursively *as* sequences of interaction *in* sequence (the orchestration) (Freiberg and Freebody 1995), iii) how these produced displays of *groupness*, and iv) how

these produced displays of interpretation and transformation. Content analysis (Haggarty, 1995) of transcripts and interviews enabled initial themes to be elicited; these were presented back to participants for member checking.

Findings

In the following section, findings will be presented in relation to two broad themes which address the following key concepts. Transcript analysis revealed firstly, the nature of discussion groups and how the members of the group, as insiders living the group as a social project, orient to the 'practices' of the group; and secondly, the transformation and the transformative nature of collaborative analytic dialogues experienced in this group. (Note: all names are pseudonyms). This section presents selected excerpts from the larger corpus of transcript material to illustrate the particular recurrent themes participants oriented to in their dialogues across the two years. Although, some of the themes support much of what is reported in the literature about the content and value of collegial conversations; in this particular paper *how* these shape and transform the group practices is a key consideration (recalling from a previous section that the transcripts served as a both springboard for reflection for participants between meetings and as a stimulus for the dialogues in subsequent meetings).

The Nature of Discussion Groups
Groups as Endless Becoming

Data revealed that the group continually formed and re-formed itself (and its history) as a social project. Its activity and relationships are made visible within its moment-by-moment interactions. The following excerpts illustrate how the participants themselves orient to this notion of '*being a group*' and '*being in the group*'.

Trisha: We might have to talk our way into understanding what it is we really want to do in this group (Meeting 1)
Lorrie: We have evolved ourselves as a particular collaborative discussion group, which transforms our practice in the way that we think... (Meeting 8)
John: I mean [we come to] every session not the same way, to get a critical grasp on what has formed us, what is forming us, and I think what's wonderful out of it, is that we don't feel disempowered by the relentlessness of demands, and we feel there's still some playfulness left (Meeting 8)

The notion of evolution is threaded through these comments by participants in two ways. Firstly, the evolution of the group itself talking its way into its own existence in a way that is not static but changing over time as the group 'transforms practice' by understanding 'what has formed and is forming them'. Secondly, for these participants the evolution of agency as transformation developed through the group talk. It seems the practices of 'being a group' are not static, but are ever present within a dynamic ever-evolving entity which only exist through the constant change and remaking that occurs through interaction within its particular social site; that is, in the intersubjective space formed by their particular discussion group. This is evident too when new members enter the group; inclusivity is implied and generosity is named below:

Hannah: I haven't been here for very long, but it's one of the things that I notice in this group, that people are very generous in the way they talk about things, and they're very generous in the way they include any newcomers into the group, yeah, it's not a process that I've seen before... (newer member, Meeting 13).
If it is taken that group practices are not static then new members not only enter the

group practices through "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave and Wenger 1991), their participation compels the group to re-form and renew itself and its particular social arrangements in continual process of endless becoming. This leads to the view, that as members enter the group, they co-create the practices of the group at the same time; that is, it accomplishes itself as a group each time it meets.

Groups as Living Entities

Educational practices are in some sense arranged as *entities that exist in relationships with other entities*, and that practices may be regarded as *living* entities that exist in ecological relationships with one another (Kemmis et al 2009, 2012); and after analysing this set of transcripts I contend that they only *can* exist because they *are* in these relationships. Members show their orientation to the nature of this group as a *living entity* (from Meeting 13).

John: Our work here is a part of the living practice of being academic.

James: The continuation of the group is evidence of the 'happening-ness', and 'ongoing-ness' of this group as an academic inquiry community, and of the valid place it holds in the lives of our group.

Both accounts centralise the value of the lived-*ness* of the group and its place in the lives of these academics; for John it 'is a part of the living practice of being an academic', and for James it 'holds a valid place in the lives of the group'. In another sense, as John and James and other members of the group come together to engage in dialogue about 'real' issues concerning the nature of their work, they *live* through the changing circumstances at their work place; their dialogues create conditions for members to interrogate and interpret these circumstances. Further to this, the following excerpts reveal the happening-*ness* and lived-*ness* of participant's practices as members orient more explicitly to these conditions in their discussions. In the segment below, participants raise issues to be taken up for discussion by the group (Meeting 7):

Trisha: In terms of our own shared [practices], our discourse, activities and our relationships, we have a living and walking and breathing set of practices in this group.

James: ...and we are finding ourselves in these social sites [at the university], and enacting things that are laid down for us, in our own way, with our own views and all that, but we're trying to emphasise that we are travelling along paths that have been laid down and the theoretical point is, to try and hold onto that socially constructed space, site, as much as our identity and agency as individuals.

John: We have this cluster of issues for us to talk about next in relation to around our students, our graduates, new graduates and them as beginning teachers in relation to standards, including the standards of the accrediting bodies.

This segment of interactions shows two things. Firstly, comments orient to the nature of communicative action experienced by members as they come together with intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus (Habermas 1987). For example in this exchange, Trisha, James and John, show how coming together around the particular cluster of issues forms a 'living and walking and breathing set of practices' which they *live* through together as they 'travel along the path laid down for them' (within the group and beyond the group at the university). Their words illustrate that the realities or lived experiences of their day-to-day university practice shapes - in mutually occurring ways - the dialogues experienced in the group. Secondly, how members co-create *how* the group will continue is evident in the continuous flow of agenda ideas for discussion as these are negotiated and renegotiated as participants come together at each meeting. They are making

explicit how their group practices, named by Trisha as the shared discourse, activities and relationships they encounter with one another, are practices; and as James describes that to live within the particular 'socially constructed space' they have created through their participation in the group a sense of identity and agency. Further to this, James' notion that the things 'laid down' for them – as forms of pre-figurement – orient not to a static arrangement but a dynamic living entity.

The topics of talk represent how members shape, and are shaped by, the conditions they 'live' in the here-and-now of academic practice. These are issues (some mentioned above) which not only impact on day-to-day activities of the profession, they give texture to the formation of the group itself as an entity. Further, the following excerpt from Meeting 14 reveals how participating in the group offers members a living sanctuary where its practices reflect a flow of energy through the practices of the group as members themselves orient to dimension of physical space-time, and develop belonging-*ness* in the social dimension. Laughter and fun add meaning and solidarity to the way group members perceive the role of the group in their professional lives.

> Terri: Apart from the value of these discussions to our work, with matters like national standards, internationalisation, globalisation, flexible delivery and so on, I think someone should go through the transcripts to count how many times we laughed-(All laughing)
> Hannah: And the importance of the references to food and laughter are an important aspect of this opportunity to get together to talk; to have conversations around these issues as an opportunity to perhaps move our own thinking, but that it isn't just doom and gloom and serious. It is as much about being together and sharing laughter, and cake.
> Terri: I thought that *that* in one sense [that] really positions what this group is doing for the group.

How the group creates itself as interdependent *living entity* is important for understanding the group as a part of an ecology of practices (Kemmis et al 2009, 2012); that is the practices the group create – for example sharing food and laughter – are connected to the broader practice of the group – for example engaging in dialogues – and these are connected to the broader practices of education. The segment suggests that although the interdependent relationships between practices in which different practices are essential to one another's survival of continuation in the practice. For example, food, conversation and laughter provide both intellectual and personal nourishment for surviving 'matters like national standards, internationalisation, globalisation, and flexible delivery'. For this group, it is also a necessary dimension of the lives of group members beyond the group; that is, to be sustained, professional practice needs the energy and the life of the group in a mutually informing relationship. See this transcript from Meeting 7 as an illustration:

> Hannah: That we've made an effort to come along, and we keep coming along, and we keep talking because we want to; because we're actually carving out space in our incredibly busy lives, because we see this as really valuable and worthwhile.
> Trisha: And staying alive in academia.
> Lorrie: You know it's more than staying alive; it's actually feeding your soul, that's how it feels for me.
> Trisha: Yes, which helps us to stay alive, despite our work we continue on.

It seems that as members orient to the place of the group in their own lives, they orient to the *dynamic balance* in which practices inside the group regulate and maintain continuity and survival in relation to inside and outside pressures (Kemmis et al 2009, 2012). Specifically for these teacher educators 'to stay alive in academia' (as Trisha says) means to 'carve out space in their incredibly busy lives' to 'feed their souls'. The sense of the 'here-and-now-*ness*,' the 'happening-*ness*' and the 'lived-*ness*' of the groups' practices in real life

appear to be what enables the practices of discussion groups to be taken as a valued dimension of academic 'work'.

The Transformative Nature of Collaborative Analytic Dialogues
Dialogues as Co-Producing Practices

In one sense, co-construction of dialogues seems to be the main practice of the group. In another sense group dialogues build a collegial view of professional work (Boud 1999), although not always with convergence or consensus. The idea of dialogues as co-production refers to what is produced or accomplished in the dialogues through ongoing negotiations about participation in the group (propositionally and procedurally). The following excerpt (from Meeting 5) illustrates how participants perceive the dialogic reciprocity between their broader academic work and the work of the group.

> Lorrie: I really also hope the discussions will go on helping us to be critical of our working lives
> James: ..you don't often have the chance when you're thinking about a particular topic, to have a group of people meeting reasonably regularly to develop conversations and ideas into practices which influence your work, and to talk about the currency of their experience, and we've had that, and that makes it quite a different kind of activity really, I think.

The views expressed by Lorrie and James are typical of how other group members connect to both the groups' dialogues as the work (or doings) of the group and propositions raised in the group as influencing their broader academic practices. It seems, the difference between these discussions and other meetings encountered in their university, is the groups' purpose of 'keeping critical' as they co-produce and 'develop conversations and ideas into practices which influence work, and to talk about the currency of experiences' as suggested by Lorrie and James. For them, 'it is quite a different kind of activity'. This is not what they encounter in their everyday working lives as academics. The following excerpt (Meeting 8) illustrates a further example of how members orient to the interconnections between the talk experienced in the group and their practices within and beyond the group:

> John: .. .a really interesting thing about doing this was not just writing but actually talking about it....It's generated a lot of critical conversation that makes a difference.
> Lorrie: …the personal thing is that there's the sharing and negotiating meaning from [our conversations] for our work at the university

It seems that what is accomplished by the dialogues is 'co-production'. As these members meet in dialogues they are enabled to explore what it means to practice in both their academic life and in the group. In their view negotiating meanings about practice can be taken to be wise and prudent action necessary for the good of each individual in the group, and simultaneously for the good of the broader profession. Talk shows how these academics are co-producers of their social reality in the project of the group (how they co-produce the practices of being the group) with real potential for influencing practices beyond the group.

Drawing on the notions of practice architectures, the findings reveal the interconnectedness of the accomplishment of sayings, doings and relating as co-produced practices. How these dimensions of practice connect up with one another is highlighted here by John, who states:

> One very important thing in terms of 'relating' within the group that is very important is that the doings and the sayings can emerge, like the sayings are constructed thanks to that relating, and, those sayings, are constructed, like you are constructed, like your own discourse as a group.

Furthermore, these practice architectures (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008) give practices like

those encountered in the interactions experienced in this discussion group:

- *their meaning and comprehensibility*: it is through the medium of language, or sayings in the cultural-discursive dimension of the practice that members engage in establishing and sustaining shared meanings; that is they create their own semantic space in which to work.

For example: Trisha tells, 'there was also a shared understanding of what we meant because we were actually involved in the practices around the issues [in the workplace]', (Meeting 13).

- *their productiveness:* the medium of work beyond the group was influenced or given agency through the interactions experienced within the group.

For example: Lorrie explains, 'my reaction [to a question by the university learning and teaching committee] was informed by all the interactions that I'd had with this very thoughtful, sensitive, intelligent group of people, and so, I kind of used this environment to inform my own critical thinking about the issue' (Meeting 13).

- *their value in establishing solidarity among the people involved in and affected by a practice of a particular kind*: it is through *relatings* in the social space created in the group meetings that the members' practices beyond the group are given power. The activity or work of the group is its dialogic practices which are given importance through language (or sayings) and relatings.

For example: Terri suggests, 'that engagement in this group has facilitated ongoing and robust collaborative discussions with colleagues with whom it may not otherwise possible to discuss important issues which effect aspects of our individual and collective work. These reflections have had perhaps subtle, but nonetheless important, flow-through effects upon relations with other academic colleagues in my everyday work' (Meeting 13).

Importantly, in their accounts, participants orient to dialogues as the practice of the group in both their purpose, their production and utility beyond the group. In one sense the data suggests that the dialogues represent the situatedness of the interactive practices which draw its resources from both the everyday lives of members and the participation in the group.

Critical, Analytic Dialogues as Transformative Practice

For this group, cursory, surface-level talk alone is simply not enough for transformation and for sustained participation in the group, as 'by seeking to learn from the 'other', only by fully grasping its claims upon one can it be critically encountered' (Bernstein 1991, p4). Rather, for these members, there needs to be an intentional and substantive dimension to the conversations which provide challenge through disruption, critique and analysis; illustrated following:

> Terri: [In this group] when you have a conversation with somebody, there's always a critical capacity
> James: I think we want to have a more scientific as it were, human science, not empirical-analytic science, but a kind of scientific discussion of what our practice is....for us to say that we are involved in a collective social action that has real consequences, and the reason we worry about these things is, is it possible to teach our students? do we have the tools to teach our students? do our students have reasonable expectations? and do we have things worth saying to them about contemporary realities. I mean there's a sense in which, "they have taken our work from us". [It] is a serious and sharp point...(Meeting 8)

For these participants the critical nature – through 'sharp and serious' conversations in what Terri describes as 'a critical capacity' - of the encounters is necessary for dialogic transformation. It is through talk that the 'collective social action' with 'real consequences' emerges. Furthermore, these participants show also in the next excerpt that 'challenge' is necessary feature for moving the group forward. The interchanges (from Meeting 7) represent the preparedness of members to engage in interrogative yet critical talk about matters of concern in a way that doesn't compromise individuals or the group.

> Trisha: ...we've got such a rich process that's been occurring, and hopefully will continue to occur.
> Colleen: ..we have to be careful not to take snippets from transcripts that actually don't capture the disruptions, the disagreements, the developmental side of the issues we raise
> John: I think, I hear what you're saying Colleen, I think probably one of the benefits of actually perhaps trying to put something like this together is it perhaps acts as a foil against the negative
> Trisha: Gives us a springboard from which to move.
> John: Yeah, gives a position to which to respond to those very points, because I mean I think that's a really useful way forward
> Jenny: I feel engaging with the group has caused me to constantly critique the nature of the academic work in which I am engaged, and enabled me to sustain a focus upon the key elements of academic work – research, teaching and service, or community work – and to better manage the administrative tasks which may potentially jeopardize such work.

The interrogative nature of the discussion in the individual and collective work of groups has the potential to lead to transformed practices, not in the sense of changing the system but in acknowledging the personal face of the challenges presented to them in their work life. Recognising that there is a need to capture the disruptions, the disagreements, and the developmental side of the issues raised in the group is necessary as a way to actually 'foil against the negative' (John) 'as a springboard from which to move' (Trisha). This is captured by Terri following, and is a typical account of how members view transformation:

> Terri: These meetings are transformative for me, it's not system change, we might have limited capacities to change the system,…. but what's transformative is although we might appear to be just sitting here, talking, we're also finding

ways to be human and to be together in the face of a kind of de-personalised set of circumstances.(Meeting 13)

For members, as a counter to succumbing to the issues and challenges of academic work 'in the face of a kind of de-personalised set of circumstances', the disposition of the group for enabling constant critique, a sustained focus forms, for them, a better management approach. Participation in the group enabled human transformation.

Agency as Transformative Practice

It is through dialogue members find ways of continuing on in workplaces which are placing increasing demands on the work life of educators in higher education. For this group of educators transformation is named in Meeting 13 as they explicitly orient to the notion of agency:

> Lorrie: To me transformation for this group is about agency, so just even having those conversations... actually transformed us, probably implicitly at the time, it was a bit like Terri was saying, these things take time to, and you think, oh, okay, so they do change,....even if you're actually changed in your resolve, or your agency to deal with that particular issue is important aspect of transformation..
> Trisha: There's actually acknowledging this or that is an issue, but looking through the data [transcripts] was always this positive edge... to think, okay, so how do we think differently about that, and these were actually put on the table in terms of what people had said..

Lorrie's words frame transformation to being about agency; the dialogues are transformative. In their accounts, dialogues enable to the group members to create conditions in their own circumstances to change resolve and to exercise agency. The ongoing practices of this group provide a space for agency which is taken by the participants to be a resource for transformation. The notion of transformation is implied following as Lorrie connects to the activity of the group as serving a function of 'learning':

> [there is an] expansive learning part of we're doing, because in many cases by having different viewpoints, we're creating a new idea, we don't go out the door there, with the same ideas that we came in with, and so it seems to me that that would be really great to sort of somehow document to see how the group have grown, both collectively and individually. (Meeting 4)

Looking closely at Lorries comment, transformation emerges as they create new ideas through listening to, critiquing and responding to different viewpoints – this is transformative action. Therefore, how the members orient to the notion of the transformative nature of the group itself is a key finding in how the group perceives its role in the living practices of higher education. Furthermore, implied in this comment is the notion of solidarity; that is, as members come together in their dialogic practice they transform existing ideas, they co-produce new ideas through collaborative communicative action constituting what is the pragmatic legacy (Bernstein 1991) of the group. In addition, the following excerpts (from Meeting 5) exemplify how members orient to the value they place on participating in the group:

> Lorrie: ...really also hope the discussions will go on helping us to be critical of our working lives
> Trisha: ..it's that sort of wider sense of things around us, and seems to me that in a sense this is what we're doing here, is that we are looking at how these different bits of information that we have, clash against each other, and you find cracks then, produced by these clashes, which then allow you to think about the unthinkable
> Lorrie: Or dream the unthinkable

James: Everybody should have a chance to be in groups like this. I think what is really important to me about this group is that, if you said we had to stop tomorrow.....I think it will be a lesser academic life not to have the conversations. So, it could go on for a long time, I mean members will come and go etc, but it could be that we want to actually preserve this.

What is featured here is the notion of how the dialogues generate new practices outside the group as education for their practice, challenge the realities, and enable the exploration of new possibilities. From their accounts, these produce changes in practice. For example, after a conversation about timetabling issues, Lorrie suggested a direct action approach. This was taken up by Christie, who suggested at the next meeting, 'that Lorrie's suggestion, gave me the ideas and then the courage to act'. Similarly, Jenny expressed a similar activist sentiment about practice change when she indicated 'she went directly to the union about the issue of workload'. These are but a few instances of agentic transformative practice that when taken together with the above excerpts, there seems to be an explicit orientation to the impact that participating in the group has for everyday life beyond the group. It is important in the context of the points taken from the transcript not only because of the strength of the conviction expressed, but also because of the apparent connection to how this group enables participants to 'go on' in their academic life.

Discussion

A key feature developed in this paper is the nature of discussion groups and how these transform practice – particularly as in connection to notions of agency, solidarity and identity. In particular the paper explored how dialogues-as-practice in professional life are made, sustained and remade. Studying the nature of the talk experienced by members of this action research group offered a useful way to study the value and *'lived-ness'* of such dialogic groups. The significance of interactions presented can be outlined in terms of what is accomplished by them in the dialogues; that is what is accomplished in and by this group is evident in the interactions which constitute the event of the group meetings and have implications for education systems (school and university).

The dialogues illustrated how a group of educators created communicative spaces to engage in substantive talk about their profession. By participating members developed a sense of *'groupness'* through a cohesion of purpose, commonality of direction (solidarity), and a sense of collective power and control (agency) (Edwards-Groves et al 2010). By creating a communicative space for the type of collaborative, yet interrogative analytic dialogue experienced by these members, it functioned to develop itself as entity for social action and interaction. Its practices created a self-sustaining dialogical community whose members listen and speak to each others' experiences, not in a cursory way, but instead in a critical, analytic and transformative way. This was important not only for group members participating in this study, but more broadly for education itself.

Group practices not only unfolded in dialogues but took shape through dialogues. The dialogues, represented in the transcripts, were both the property of an ever-evolving arrangement of sayings, doings and relatings, and they were the mechanism through which the parts of the broader practice (the group as a subsidiary organism of a broader organisation) respond and adapt to change. The content and the context of the dialogues themselves revealed strong connectivity to the value of participating in groups as an enabling and legitimate practice in professional life and for professional learning. It is possible to draw from this that participants took up the idea of the social particularities of the practices they were producing collectively. Members were intricately connected to what was accomplished within the group, how they oriented to and accounted for the practices they co-produced

through participation, and how they accounted for the effect that participation within the group had on other practices (outside the group).

The self-generative nature of the practices was promoted through active participation within a textured community of professionals; that is, the dialogues through a process of action and interaction generated transformation. This community of individuals not only shared a history, they participated in making their own history through their collaborative analytic dialogues; they moved forward to create for themselves the conditions under which they practiced and interpreted practice. Findings revealed that in this case, creating communicative spaces to engage in collaborative analytic dialogues with other professionals was critical, emancipatory and transformative; and perhaps essential for sustaining the profession at a time when the burden of the educational work is being challenged by bureaucratic enterprise and policy in a climate of auditing, performance management and measurement.

The dialogues experienced by these group members over time assembled particular collegial relationships of a sort which reflected an agency derived from the solidarity formed by participating. In one sense, the group became its sayings, doings and relatings. Through these dialogues members explicitly oriented to the transformation experienced through practices of the group. A sense of ‘*groupness’* was revealed in the accounts the participants themselves gave of their participation in the dialogues; that is, in this case they attributed transformation to their membership of the group. It was illustrated that there was a mutually informing, reflexive process at work. The group was not only shaped by the interactions encountered in the meetings, but at the same time the interactions were shaped by the group’s system world experiences. And so, transformation, for this group, was not simply about changing practices of systems but more locally about their agency within the system which was given power through their participation.

Importantly, transcript analysis is one way to look at practices from the perspective of the practitioner – as *insiders* of particular sites. Furthermore, the perspective of the insider-practitioner may give us some insight into *the practice itself* (Carr and Kemmis 1986) as participants showed transformation in their *practices* (their sayings, doings and relatings), and revealed their *understandings* of their practice and the *conditions* under which their practice is carried out. Analysis showed how these, as *living practices*, are characteristic of the group and comprehensible between group members in the sense that they relate to one another in mutually created and coherent ways. In fact, what the spaces and the *collaborative transformative dialogues* which came to exist there legitimised these discussion groups *as* professional practice.

Conclusion

This paper addresses the perennial question centring on how systems and schools support educators in their quest to juggle competing educational, economic and socio-political agendas. Although the participants of this study were located within the field of teacher education, there are important implications for all those in education. In creating communicative spaces for critical and analytic dialogue, educators were able to generate transformative spaces which engendered agency in a profession being pressed into compliance and performativity. In one sense there is an obligation for administration to not only legitimise the dialogic practices of such focused discussion groups but to support educators to find those spaces for themselves as a way to re-engage with human face of education. Ultimately this is what is at stake.

Considering interaction at the dialogic level is generally a ‘taken-for-granted’ feature of teaching life. However, the key findings in this paper focus on the importance of dialogues for co-producing, sustaining and transforming professional practice. In fact, as was

previously suggested by Greene, Kim and Marioni (2007), the open-ended nature of reflective inquiry through participation in such collaborative practices should be instituted as a valid part of a faculty's growth and development plan (p. 56). Such an option provides opportunities for educators to research for *praxis* (Kemmis 2010) and to redefine themselves in their roles and professional identities.

Professional practice is not simply about performance and accountability. It is also and possibly more importantly, about the fundamental human and living face of practice encountered through interpersonal interactions that interweave personal and collective experiences (Routledge 1996). In one sense the findings serve to challenge educators to consider ways to engage in more community, collaborative and praxis-oriented approaches in their professional life, as ways to transcend the conventional divisions between the interpersonal and performance dimensions of education as distinct and separate sets of practices. The strengths of creating communicative spaces for critical analytic dialogues among professionals can be illustrated through the sensitivity, the spirit of collaboration, the lived-*ness* and the transformative nature of the dialogic practices encountered in groups.

Although the work and working conditions of academics have changed significantly (Anderson, Johnson and Saha 2002; Boud 1999), the findings of this study show how participating in discussion groups offers members the communicative spaces to find for themselves (individually and collectively) 'in practice' transformation through agency and solidarity. Furthermore, the logic of the findings presented suggests discussion groups be legitimised *as* professional practice which stand as a resource for hope, renewal and transformation in a profession which continuously struggles to find a balance between the demands of a morally committed practice, social transformation and externally imposed standards.

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