Using Professional Conversations as a Participatory Research Method Within the Discipline of Sport Pedagogy-Related Teacher and Coach Education

Kendall Jarrett[1], Belinda Cooke[2], Stephen Harvey[3], Víctor López-Ros[4]

[1] CSHE, University of Kent, [2] Leeds Beckett University, [3] Ohio University, [4] University of Girona

Journal of Participatory Research Methods

This article documents the use of professional conversation as a method of participatory research to question, inform and innovate assessment practices used in tertiary settings. Utilising a professional conversations model, four tertiary educators engaged in a 6-month long email conversation designed to explore our individual and collective sense-making around use of a specific mode of assessment relating to sport pedagogy-related teacher and coach education courses. Justification for use of a professional conversations model is presented, along with participants' experiences of engaging in this participatory method of data capture. A brief summary of participants' post-conversation views on PASS is included, as well as recommendations relating to the utility of using a professional conversations model as a participatory research method.

Professional conversations

There is a commonly held view among academics that engagement in professional conversation leads to professional growth. For example, Timperley's (2015, p. 4) view that "professional knowledge is constructed through social interaction" reflects the idea that, when and where possible, opportunities for professional conversation should be embraced by academics as a means to better understand the effectiveness of current practices in higher education settings. Professional conversations among teacher educators "may not seem to be anything particularly out of the ordinary" (Henderson & Petersen, 2008, p. 1), but they can provide opportunities for academics to investigate their own thinking and practice in an informed and supportive environment. Our view reflects that of Feldman's (1999, p. 5) in that we also believe that systematic and focused professional conversations occur when "teachers tell each other brief stories of practice, listen, question, and tell other anecdotes... carry it back to their classrooms where they try out new ideas... then return to the group and tell new anecdotes."

Moreover, engagement in professional conversations promotes the idea of adaptive expertise and a means to "navigate the constant societal and technological changes present in today's complex education contexts" (Timperley, 2015, p. 2). It is important to recognize, though, that as tertiary educators we understand that finding the appropriate time for professional conversations can be challenging. However, a commitment to creating spaces for collegial dialogue and own-practice introspection offers tertiary educators

significant opportunities for joint construction of new understandings essential to the development of the field (Henderson & Petersen, 2008; Orland-Barak, 2006).

Professional conversations as a form of participatory research

With engagement in professional conversations aligned to adaptive expertise, introspection and the development of a collaborative space, we view it as a form of participatory research in that conversations result in a "sharing of knowledge and the growth of understanding" (Feldman, 1999, p. 2). This sharing of knowledge acts as a mechanism to shift emphasis from action and change to democratic collaboration, a fundamental precondition for participatory research (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). As such, it is our view that involvement in professional conversations reflects a participatory research process that "enables co-researchers to step back cognitively from familiar routines, forms of interaction, and power relationships in order to fundamentally question and rethink established interpretation of situations and strategies" (Bergold & Thomas, 2012, p. 192).

Furthermore, as involvement in professional conversations encourages acts of responsiveness to the needs of others, it promotes participants' reflexivity and mutual exchange of skills through the revealing and joint discussion of conflict and resolution in professional practice (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Borrett & Rowley, 2020). This "safe space," where time and space for reflection is afforded to all those who contribute, is often a feature of professional conversations and espoused as a fundamental principle of participatory research (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Our understanding of these links between professional conversation and participatory research helped to shape this small-scale reflective research project that utilized a professional conversations model to inform participants' understanding of a mode of assessment, known as PASS (Practically Assessed Structured Scenarios), used in sport pedagogy-related teacher and coach education.

Practically Assessed Structured Scenarios (PASS)

PASS is predominantly a spoken-word mode of assessment authentic in its use of practical scenarios to test practical knowledge. PASS is a series of pre-prepared assessment scenarios that students move through (either individually or in a group) designed to examine understanding and application of different instructional pedagogies learned throughout the taught program (Brown & Race, 2012). Adapted from Objective Structured Clinical Examinations often used in medical and veterinary education (Kirton & Kravitz, 2011), a typical PASS assessment may include the following spoken-word elements:

1. Individual responses/group discussion offered in response to pedagogical or content-focused questions;

2. Group responses to a range of verbal, written, or visual activities;

3. Individual verbal responses outlining key observations made of practical performance, still, or video images relating to specific teaching and coaching scenarios.

With assessment practices in sport pedagogy-related teacher and coach education remaining relatively underdeveloped in recent years (Starck, 2018), investigating whether and how tertiary students learn about assessment continues to be of importance to deliverers of sport pedagogy courses (Lorente-Catalán & Kirk, 2016). Hence, the development of this small-scale, IRB approved study designed to question, inform, and (ultimately) innovate current assessment practices utilized by sport pedagogy colleagues located around the world.

Participants

Each participant/author had at least 12 years of tertiary teaching experience delivering sport pedagogy-related teacher and coach education courses. Two authors had previous experience in implementing PASS while the other two had yet to experience PASS implementation. All participants were known to each other prior to study commencement, having either worked at the same institution or been involved as research collaborators. At the time of data generation (e.g. email correspondence) all participants were delivering university courses with a practical and theoretical focus on developing university students' understanding of sport pedagogy.

Email correspondence

Kralik et al. (2000, p. 916) have suggested that although correspondence may appear to be a rather "impersonal communication medium," the practice of generating narratives from dialogue has enhanced its reputation as a viable qualitative research process. For the purposes of this research project conducted over a six-month period, correspondence was organized through email. According to Rheingold (1993), the development and use of email can be linked to inventive thinking about computer use and amplifying human thinking and communication. Email is now widely considered an "efficient means to correspond quickly with participants" (Finn & Benyon, 2008, p. 172) with messages received and actioned asynchronously in a timely and largely secure manner (Oshri et al., 2007). This provides obvious benefits for users communicating from different locations around the world as it alleviates potential barriers to communication caused by different time zones.

Professional conversations model

A professional conversations model was utilized in this research project to provide a guiding framework for participants to engage in a four-way email conversation. The model itself was developed in Australia to assist tertiary education providers and teacher registration authorities with their implementation of the then-new National Professional Standards for Teachers. In essence, use of a professional conversations model was seen as a vehicle to

view the new National Standards as "development standards" rather than just "regulatory standards" (Leonard, 2012). According to Leonard (2012, p. 48), an outcome of model use was the development of skills to help critically analyze teaching and learning practices in a "collaborative and future orientated" manner. The model itself "leans heavily on Hattie's (2011) work on effective feedback" and is based around the use of professional conversation prompts such as "How am I doing?" and "Where to next?" (Leonard, 2012, p. 48). The model is also informed by Gan's (2011) use of explicit prompts designed to help scaffold professional conversations between peers to provide effective analysis of professional practice (Leonard, 2012). Accordingly, five explicit prompts were initially agreed upon by three of the four[1] contributors to solicit discussion from which four-way dialogue was completed via group email. All conversation threads were shared (visible) among all four participants. The five prompt questions were:

1. How are you doing with respect to course-related assessment design and implementation?

2. What are the effective elements in the current modes of assessment you utilise?

3. How suitable is (might) PASS (be) as a mode of assessment within current programs offered?

4. What are/might be the contextual challenges associated with PASS implementation?

5. Where to next for course-related assessment design and implementation?

Data analysis

Data collected from these professional conversations was in written form (Borrett & Rowley, 2020) and constitutes the sharing of knowledge on participants' own terms using their own written language derived from the context of everyday professional experience (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Kindon et al., 2007). Analysis of conversation data reflected an informal and unstructured approach synonymous with participatory research (Nind, 2011) with the visiting and revisiting of participants' written dialogue determined at an individual level. This allowed for different degrees of participation in the data generation and analysis phases, which is consistent with another fundamental principle of participatory research (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Thus, the process of data analysis was self-determined and continual, involving personal, interpersonal, and collective analysis (Nicholls, 2009). This repeated building of and exposure to the written conversation then enabled individuals

---

[1] One of the initial researchers withdrew at an early stage of the project and was replaced by another researcher.
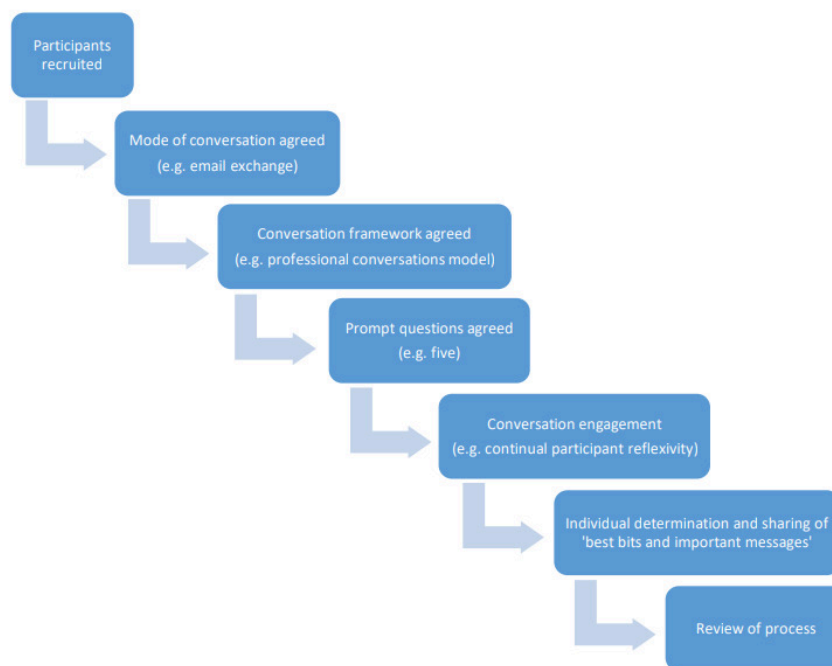
Diagram 1: Process diagram reflecting the participatory research steps undertaken

to take "the best bits or most important messages" (Nind, 2011, p. 359) to assist with their sense-making. Diagram 1 provides an overview of the research process.

Discussion

It is beyond the scope of this brief report to present and review in detail the conversations had in response to the five prompt questions. However, as a conclusion to conversation involvement, participants were asked to reflect on and share with the group which aspect/s of assessment discussion resonated with them the most and why. When considering what use of a participatory research method requires, Bergold & Thomas (2012, p. 210) state that "various contributions to the results must be clearly visible," hence the inclusion in Table 1 of extracts from participants' reflections with each providing a nuanced appraisal of PASS and its potential use.

Perceptions of professional conversation model use

In participatory research, it "is to be expected that the participants will also have different views on the quality of the research process and its results" (Bergold & Thomas, 2012, p. 213). Accordingly, Table 2 presents a summary of participants' perceptions of the benefits, challenges, opportunities and limitations of using a professional conversations model as a participatory research method.

Recommendations

Recommendations relating to use of the professional conversations model as a participatory research method:

Table 1 - Extracts from participants' concluding views on PASS

Participant 1	With previous experience of using PASS, there was value in discussing the challenges of PASS that others envisage. For example, to circumnavigate potential staff resourcing issues, the inclusion of personal or group video capture elements could provide a "future looking" way of assessing students that is collegial, authentic and makes use of learning technologies.
Participant 2	In terms of mainstreaming inclusive assessment practices, PASS offers much potential given the various ways in which students can contribute to completing the tasks. This year, in consultation with some of our disabled students, I made a decision to remove the time constraints on PASS task completion for *all* students. This reduced reported levels of anxiety for everyone. We are excited by the prospect that mainstreaming our students' experiences of inclusive assessment will influence their own awareness of the need to mainstream approaches to inclusive assessment in their future practice as educators.
Participant 3	I am still struggling with the thought of implementing PASS due to the nature of some of my classes, especially ones in online spaces being extremely short in time (i.e. 7 weeks). Such restrictions do not quite align with use of PASS.
Participant 4	Assessment moments should be considered to be a natural part of the process of learning, rather than an "examination." In this vein, I am fully convinced that PASS is a suitable assessment tool. PASS can help bridge the gap between theory and practice by putting practical knowledge at the heart of the learning process.

Table 2: Summary of participants' perceptions relating to use of a professional conversations model

Benefits	1. Most of us readily cite the work of key scholars whose research in teaching and learning has influenced our own pedagogical practice. However, the application of that work to our own subject areas relies more on day to day experience and shared examples in conversation with colleagues. Calling these "professional conversations" assigns these activities appropriate importance and value. It also lessens the likelihood they will only ever stem from serendipitous encounters on campus – the sorts of encounters which the current global pandemic has robbed us of. 2. Some of what we read as academics can be rather dense or lacking in immediate relevance to our own contexts. The notion of a professional conversation sounds *and is* more engaging and offers a different, but no less scholarly, learning experience. 3. Involvement in such conversations allows you to permanently "re-think" about your own professional practices. 4. To share personal experiences in professional settings is also of benefit emotionally, not just practically.
Challenges	1. Professional conversations require sufficient time for participants to develop an appreciation of the variety of contexts and constraints each participant operates within. 2. All of our conversations were asynchronous and there are several obvious advantages to this including the time differences. I think some synchronous activity might have been beneficial. 3. To incorporate professional conversations as a regular tool/activity in professional careers. 4. To develop methodological protocols that favor the transferability between professional conversations, at least among professionals from the same field.
Opportunities	1. Reflecting on what is working and what isn't in our own teaching, assessment and learning is something we do constantly, but this is too often a solitary activity. During the current pandemic there is a much greater risk of isolation and an even stronger mandate to review our practice. Professional conversation can provide a vehicle and a structure to value and capitalise on the social elements of our professional practice. 2. To understand better and/or deeper certain professional situations. Can help with the interpretation of professional issues from different theoretical or practical perspectives. 3. Can assist with the development of departmental mentoring and/or leadership practices.
Limitations	1. This approach to research is relatively time-consuming and most academics would consider themselves to be lacking in this commodity. 2. Some colleagues who would consider this type of research to lack rigor. Hopefully we are moving beyond such a time as prejudices become less evident. 3. Because professional experiences are always situated, there is a context transfer limitation.

1. Development of prompt questions that are distinct and separate to help limit discussion thread contamination and to aid conversation analysis;

2. Maintaining strong timeframes for conversation engagement e.g. fortnightly response windows;

3. Involvement in synchronous discussions (time zone permitting) to "kick off" discussion of a new prompt question (e.g. through use of Zoom or Microsoft Teams) to help maintain both connection between participants and discussion vigor;

4. Rotating lead discussant responsibilities for each prompt question.

Conclusion

Similar to the research justification raised by Henderson & Petersen (2008, p. 3), the purpose of this brief report was to "prompt academic discussion and to connect academic staff through professional and pedagogical conversations about aspects of their everyday work." Involvement in this small-scale study was also used as a formal means through which contributors could engage in professional development of academic practice via involvement in participatory research. To this end, a professional conversations model helped to facilitate participants' exchange of views in relation to current and future assessment design and practice. Participants' overall perceptions of the benefits, challenges, opportunities and limitations of using a professional conversations model revealed a range of considerations pertinent to developing and instilling the use of such a model to drive future professional development of practice. As such, the use of a professional conversations model was espoused as a participatory research method enabling a collaborative and future-oriented focus to peer discussions from which their professional practice as tertiary educators could benefit.

REFERENCES

Bergold, J., & Thomas, S. (2012). Participatory Research Methods: A Methodological Approach in Motion. *Historical Social Research*, *37*(4), 191–222.

Borrett, E., & Rowley, J. (2020). Using visual and participatory research methods to describe processes of educational resilience in returners to education. *Educational & Child Psychology*, *37*(3), 10–25. https://doi.org/10.15123/UEL.883QZ

Brown, S., & Race, P. (2012). Using effective assessment to promote learning. In L. Hunt & D. Chalmers (Eds.), *University teaching in focus: A learning-centred approach* (pp. 74–91). Routledge.

Feldman, A. (1999). Conversation as methodology in collaborative action research. *School of Education, University of Massachusetts*. Amherst, MA. http://people.umass.edu/~afeldman/ActionResearchPapers/Feldman1999.PDF

Finn, S., & Benyon, R. (2008). An investigation of the effective management of communication for successful distributed software development teams. In R. Dyerson & G. Harindranath (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2nd European Conference on Information Management and Evaluation* (pp. 169–176). Academic Publishing Limited.

Gan, M. (2011). *The effects of prompts and explicit coaching on peer feedback quality* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Auckland]. https://researchspace.aukland.ac.nz/handle/2292/6630

Hattie, J. (2011). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximising impact on learning*. Routledge.

Henderson, R., & Petersen, S. (2008, July). *Professional conversations: Teacher educators making sense of literacy pedagogies*. [Conference presentation]. National Conference for Teachers of English and Literacy, Adelaide, Australia.

Kindon, S., Pain, R., & Kesby, M. (2007). Participatory action research: Origins, approaches and methods. In S. Kindon, R. Pain, & M. Kesby (Eds.), *Participatory action research approaches and methods: Connecting people, participation and place* (pp. 9–18). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203933671

Kirton, S. B., & Kravitz, L. (2011). Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs) Compared With Traditional Assessment Methods. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, *75*(6), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe756111

Kralik, D., Koch, T., & Brady, B. M. (2000). Pen pals: correspondence as a method for data generation in qualitative research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *31*(4), 909–917. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2000.01358.x

Leonard, S. N. (2012). Professional conversations: Mentor teachers' theories-in-use using the Australian National Professional Standards for Teachers. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, *37*(12), 46–62. https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2012v37n12.7

Lorente-Catalán, E., & Kirk, D. (2016). Student teachers' understanding and application of assessment for learning during a physical education teacher education course. *European Physical Education Review*, *22*(1), 65–81. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336x15590352

Nicholls, R. (2009). Research and indigenous participation: critical reflexive methods. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *12*(2), 117–126. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570902727698

Nind, M. (2011). Participatory data analysis: a step too far? *Qualitative Research*, *11*(4), 349–363. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111404310

Orland-Barak, L. (2006). Convergent, divergent and parallel dialogues: knowledge construction in professional conversations. *Teachers and Teaching*, *12*(1), 13–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/13450600500364547

Oshri, I., Kotlarsky, J., & Willcocks, L. P. (2007). Global software development: Exploring socialization and face-to-face meetings in distributed strategic projects. *The Journal of Strategic Information Systems*, *16*(1), 25–49. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsis.2007.01.001

Rheingold, H. (1993). *The virtual community: Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. Addison-Wesley.

Starck, J. R. (2018). *Assessment practices in physical education* [PhD thesis, University of Alabama]. https://ir.ua.edu/bitstream/handle/123456789/5190/file_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Timperley, H. (2015). Professional conversations and improvement-focused feedback: a review of the research literature and the impact on practice and student outcomes. *Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership*. https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/professional-conversations-literature-review-oct-2015.pdf?sfvrsn=fc2ec3c_0