Using Reflective Dialogues to Explore Pedagogies in Higher Education

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Abstract:

This chapter will focus on the use of reflective dialogues to explore pedagogical practice in higher education (HE). Reflective dialogues allow researchers and participants to reflect on observed phenomena together, engaging in collaborative reflection that may allow both the researcher and the researched to gain from the interaction, throwing into focus different aspects of practice and a different perspective on the situation, and blurring the boundaries of research and researched into a more reciprocal relationship. Drawing on research which investigated the relationship between critical pedagogical theory and practice with ten self-identifying critical pedagogues across eight English universities, I will explore the benefits and tensions of using a reflective dialogue approach, and the impact this methodology can have on researchers and participants. This chapter will make a case for reflective dialogues as both a practice for educators and as a methodology and explore how to do it, supported by relevant methodological literature, as well as the benefits and challenges of using reflective dialogues in social research, concluding with a discussion on how reflective dialogues might be used in other contexts to aid professional learning and reflection.

In this chapter, I will focus on the use of reflective dialogues to explore pedagogy in higher education (HE). Interviews are a common method used in qualitative research, however, ethical issues around power, empowerment and participation highlight questions about who interviews benefit and what participants can gain from their involvement (Kvale, 2006). Reflective dialogues allow researchers and participants to reflect on observed phenomena together, engaging in collaborative reflection that may allow both the researcher and the researched to gain from the interaction, throwing into focus different aspects of practice and a different perspective on the situation, and blurring the boundaries of research and researched into a more reciprocal relationship.

Drawing on research which investigated the relationship between critical pedagogical theory and practice with ten self-identifying critical pedagogues across eight English universities, I will explore the benefits and tensions of using a reflective dialogue approach, and the impact this methodology can have on researchers and participants. This chapter will make a case for this approach as both a practice for educators and as a methodology and explore how to do it, supported by relevant methodological literature. Although scholarship around the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983) has previously highlighted the importance of praxis for teachers and lecturers, the reflective dialogue is unique in that it requires a more collaborative reflection, which may provide the critical distance needed to engage in valuable reflection on practice. The reflective dialogue is more in line with Schön's concept of 'reflection-on-action', as it occurs after the fact, rather than involving 'reflection-in-action' (Schön, 1983). Similar to 'reflection-on-action', the reflective dialogue is useful for empowering practitioners to consider what has occurred and how they might act differently in the future to achieve different outcomes. Reflective dialogues or teacher dialogues have long been encouraged in teacher education (Rarieya, 2005), although they may be conceptualised differently by researchers or practitioners. This chapter will build on this work by exploring the use of reflective dialogues for higher education educators.

This chapter will begin by exploring the rationale for using reflective dialogues and what they are, followed by a discussion about the key differences between reflective dialogues and interviews. I will then present my research on self-identifying critical pedagogues in English HE to demonstrate how reflective dialogues can be used to explore the connection between pedagogical beliefs and practice, as well as structural factors which may impact practice. After discussing some of the key findings of this research, I will explore the benefits and challenges of using reflective dialogues in social research, concluding with a discussion on how reflective dialogues might be used in other contexts to aid professional learning and reflection.

Introduction: Rationale for creating opportunities for reflection on practice

Many scholars have highlighted the importance and benefits of engaging in reflection on practice. Schön (1983) and Argyris (1976) were early proponents of reflection, highlighting its use for evaluating professional

values and practice. In the context of HE, Kreber (2005) suggests that much of the research on teaching and learning in universities focuses on demonstrating 'good practice' rather than critically reflecting in order to evaluate or transform practice. This highlights a need for genuine critical reflection on teaching practice in HE, which might encourage educators to explore their pedagogical values and beliefs and how these align with their current practice. The work of Argyris (1976) on espoused theory and theory-in-use also reveals the potential benefit of reflecting on practice, especially if this reflection reveals a mismatch between our pedagogical beliefs and our practice. This may be even more important in the HE context, where not all lecturers and professors have been educated as teachers – therefore, they may engage in certain teaching practices based on previous experiences as a student or without truly reflecting on how these pedagogical approaches impact student learning or outcomes (Peel, 2005). That is not to say that all HE educators do not have teacher training or do not reflect on their practice, but the nature of academia also often puts pressure on research outputs, meaning that staff may not have the time to engage in continuing professional development (CPD) or focus on reflecting on their teaching practice.

What is a reflective dialogue?

Reflective dialogues have been explored by previous researchers, mainly in the context of teacher education and development of teacher practice (Rarieya, 2005). This literature highlights the benefit of engaging in reflective practice in order to improve teaching, focusing on teacher practice and understanding of applying theories and approaches in the classroom. Essential in a reflective dialogue is the collaborative nature of reflection – the dialogue is necessary to gain the full benefits of this exercise. While reflection is usually an individual task, that occurs in the mind or maybe in a journal, a reflective dialogue "creates a level of understanding about the constraints of one another's practices and gives the teachers engaged in the reflective dialogue the opportunity to bring their expertise to an endeavour that is potentially enriching to all involved" (Rarieya, 2005: 315). Although the term 'reflective dialogue' has different meanings in different settings, they often involve observation of teaching practice, followed by a discussion about teaching practice (Peel, 2005). Some studies, like Rarieya (2005), engage in reflective dialogues over a period of time, allowing the researcher to see the impact of these reflective conversations on the practice of their participants. Others might simply ask teachers to reflect on their teaching practice without observation (see Breunig, 2009), although this may make a focused reflection more difficult.

Reflective dialogues make a space where those involved in the dialogue can learn from each other and our experiences with the pedagogy. This is a potential for both the researcher and the participant to engage in praxis regarding the process of teaching and doing research. The use of the interview method is often portrayed as "a progressive dialogical form of research that provided a personal alternative to the objectifying positivist quantification of questionnaires and harsh manipulation of behaviourist experiments" (Kvale, 2006: 481). However, the interview dynamic can be rife with power imbalance and manipulation. Kvale (2006: 481) refers to this as the "qualitative progressivity myth", where researchers assume that dialogical interviews are an inherently emancipatory or 'good' data collection method. Many researchers attempt to build rapport with participants for the sole purpose of getting them to divulge personal information they might not otherwise share. Although interview research often encourages reciprocity as a way to build rapport, this can actually lead to a situation where the close relationship between the researcher and researched allow for more exploitation than a more distanced quantitative approach might invoke (Kvale, 2006). Kvale (2006: 483) is critical of the 'egalitarian' nature of the interview as dialogue, "it gives an illusion of mutual interests in a conversation, which in actuality takes place for the purpose of just the one part—the interviewer". Although I agree with Kvale that interviews are often exploitative even when they have an emancipatory aim, I do think that some interviews can provide a space for mutual interests to be discussed in a way that benefits both the researcher and the researched. Indeed, Freire (1970: 87), advocated for co-investigation of people's actions through dialogue:

> For precisely this reason, the methodology proposed requires that the investigators and the people (who would normally be considered objects of that investigation) should act as *co-investigators*. The more active an attitude men and women take in regard to the exploration of their thematics, the more they deepen their critical awareness of reality and, in spelling out those thematics, take possession of that reality.

One should also not assume that reflective dialogues are without ethical issues around power and empowerment. Indeed, Rarieya (2005) positioned herself as a reflective coach and expert in the teaching process, which led to issues around authority, power and participation. Although Rarieya (2005) claims that reflective coaches should be experts, I found in my own work that this is not necessary, as the power of the reflective dialogue is not in telling a teacher what they have done wrong and how to improve it, but for the educator to reflect on this through discussion with their conversant and come to their own conclusions about how to transform their practice. Indeed, it was my aim to not identify or position myself as an expert, as this makes the process of reflection less threatening. We might see the reflective dialogue with another as a sort of scaffold for engaging in critical reflection – discussing observations, issues, systemic barriers (such as requirements within your university or issues around professional autonomy) and thoughts with another can push these further than if they were solely internal and individual.

What are the key differences between reflective dialogues and interviews?

While there are overlaps between reflective dialogues and semi-structured interviews, there are several key distinctions between these approaches, which are all related to the epistemological underpinnings and power distribution. The first difference focuses on who structures and leads the discussion. The second difference pertains to who benefits from the discussion, and the third, related difference, is the dynamic between the researcher and the researched. I will briefly introduce these topics here, but they will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter through the research I conducted.

In traditional interviews, the researcher typically leads the interview by using pre-determined or researcher focused questions that do not allow for the participant to guide or refocus the discussion (Karineli-Miller, Strier & Pessach, 2009). Implicit in this dynamic is that the researcher is the expert, the designer of the research, the analyser of the data and ultimately the disseminator of the findings (Kvale, 2006). However, power can be negotiated, and is often dynamic rather than static, throughout the interview by explicit and implicit displays of power, for example a participant deciding not to answer a question or leaving the interview (Hoffman, 2007). I would argue that there is even more potential for the participant to collaborate in the shaping of the discussion of the reflective dialogue. In addition to their control over the direction of the conversation is the fact that both parties benefit more explicitly from the reflective dialogue, whereas in an interview the aim is often for the researcher to extract knowledge or experience from the participant.

The use of reflective dialogues rather than traditional semi-structured interviews allows for a more collaborative dynamic between the researcher and the educator who is reflecting on their own practice. This collaborative dynamic also implies a level of reciprocity that ensures that both parties in this dialogue learn and benefit (Lather, 1986). While reciprocity has sometimes been seen as exploitative (Kvale, 2006), it can also be genuine and not tokenistic. Creating a space where university educators can reflect on their practice without a feeling of judgment coming from an expert or someone in the professional development department of their university is important and creates a safer space to honestly reflect on practice and constraints in the classroom. In this situation, both the discussants can benefit from the conversation, whether it is being used for research, reflection on practice, or both.

I will now share a case study to outline a use of reflective dialogues and to demonstrate the impact they can have on both the researcher and the participants.

Case Study: Exploring Critical Pedagogical Practice through Reflective Dialogues

When researching the practice of critical pedagogues in English universities, I became interested in the mismatch between pedagogical beliefs and pedagogical practice. Literature and previous research on critical pedagogical practice in the university often focused on individual cases of critical pedagogues reflecting on or researching their own practice, often highlighting the challenges they faced (see Ellsworth, 1989) with putting theory into practice. Building on the work of Breunig (2009), which explored the practice and reflections of critical pedagogues in North America, I decided to combine participant observation and reflective dialogues to explore examples of teaching practice through dialogue with participants. My findings revealed that in addition to numerous manifestations of critical pedagogy, there were also factors at the micro, meso and macro level which prevented the implementation of critical pedagogical values, instead forcing educators to neglect their 'espoused theory', relying instead on a more mainstream 'theory-in-use'. Despite these barriers

to critical pedagogy, educators were often able to find small ways to implement their pedagogical beliefs, subverting what they identified as the neoliberal and marketized university. Reflection and reflexivity played important roles in the research, as they allowed both me and my participants to reflect on our practice. Another finding of the research was that participants rarely had the space to reflect on their own practice and pedagogical values, and they often felt quite isolated from other educators who might not be seen to share their pedagogical beliefs.

Method

Ten self-identifying critical pedagogues (SICP) participated in the research, from different universities in England and taught a range of different subjects and levels (both BA and MA). These participants were recruited using snowball sampling, as they were from a hard-to-reach group of individuals (Noy, 2008). I observed seven of the ten SICPs as a starting off point for our reflective dialogues (the other 3 were not teaching at the time), which were approximately one-hour, individual discussions that were led by reflections on their practice and specific examples from my fieldnotes. Reflective dialogues were mainly carried out in person, although two were conducted over Skype. Often, I was able to schedule the reflective dialogue in directly after the final observation, but occasionally I had to return to the participants' university at another time for the reflective dialogue. There were advantages and disadvantages to both approaches, if it was directly after the observation the lesson was fresh in both of our minds, however it didn't leave long for me to review my fieldnotes and prepare for the discussion.

Reflective dialogues after the participant observations enabled me to ask the educators about the pedagogical decision making behind the practice I had experienced in their classrooms. This method came out of the limitations of other research (i.e., Breunig, 2009; Ellsworth, 1989) on critical pedagogical practice, which seems to rely heavily on critical pedagogues' reflections about their practice, whether in the form of practitioner research or interviews in which critical pedagogues were asked to talk about their practice in a general sense. This approach, while useful, may leave out important areas for discussion, not necessarily because educators are purposefully withholding this information, rather that "as well as affecting them in ways of which they are conscious, these factors [social structures] can influence agents in ways of which they are unaware including the categories and concepts that they use to structure their interpretation of particular situations" (Ashwin, 2008: 152). While the works of Breunig (2009) and Ellsworth (1989) are significant in that they provide accounts of practice and the perceptions and beliefs of those who identify as critical pedagogues, what they neglect is the relationship between theory and practice (or beliefs and actions), and how they inform each other. This dynamic was perhaps more visible to me as an outsider and meant that we then had the opportunity to discuss pedagogical decisions and actions. Another issue with Bruenig's (2009) work in particular was that their discussion tended to focus on practice at the general level, rather than looking at specific situations (Ashwin, 2008). By using field notes from participant observations, I was able to focus on particular pedagogical approaches and activities that were used, and to also reflect on my experience as a participant in their classrooms. Through the reflective dialogue, participants also had the opportunity to step outside the situation and discuss the effects of structural factors on their practice (Ashwin, 2008).

Although the reflective dialogues were purposefully left open and were not guided by a predetermined interview schedule, they were guided by my observations of teaching practice, and therefore to some extent the episodes that I extracted from my fieldnotes. Participants were also asked to come to the reflective dialogue with questions or topics for discussion. Although the dialogues were mainly guided by examples from their practice, I also wanted to create a space where the participants could share responsibility for guiding the conversation and for highlighting any issues they found important. This involved a balancing act between letting the participants say what they thought was important while ensuring that we didn't go too off topic (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2017).

Findings

They key findings of this research were that there are different manifestations of critical pedagogy, depending on whether educators focused on a critical curriculum, or teaching knowledge for social justice, or on a critical pedagogy, positioning the teacher as co-investigator rather than as expert. This finding helped to develop a framework for conceptualising different manifestations of critical pedagogy (see Figure 1). I won't discuss this framework in detail, as this paper is on the use of reflective dialogues rather than the findings of this research.
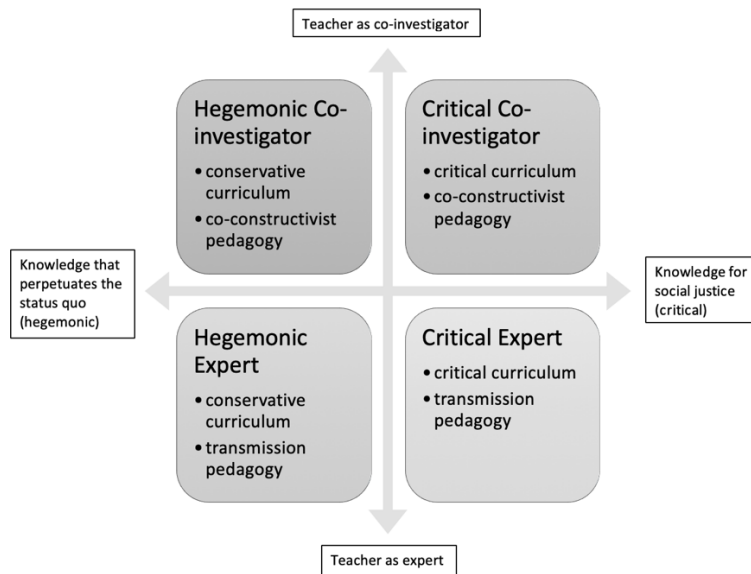
Figure 1: Different Manifestations of Critical Pedagogy

Other key findings were that the self-identifying critical pedagogues in my study encountered challenges at the macro, meso and micro levels of their practice that made the implementation of their critical pedagogical beliefs difficult. These related to the 'cognitive unconscious' discussed by Ashwin (2008)—by engaging in reflective dialogue, participants' awareness of the impact of structure and agency was raised. Throughout the reflective dialogues, challenges at the macro level of practice such as policy and societal discourse around the marketisation of higher education, and how these led a focus on the economic purpose of higher education and instrumentalist approaches to learning, which may be at odds with critical pedagogy, were discussed. Challenges at the meso level included larger cohorts, regulations around course development, and differing values within departments and institutions and how this led to fear around taking risks and using innovative approaches. Micro level challenges were those that occurred in the classroom – and were often a result of the issues at other levels. These were larger class sizes, issues with student engagement, lack of time and the impact these had on pedagogical decision making.

While the above findings addressed my research questions around exploring the nature of critical pedagogy and the challenges to implementing a critical approach in English universities, other findings around the importance of creating a space for educators to engage in reflection and the isolation felt by critical educators are potentially of more relevance to this methodological chapter. Several participants mentioned that they valued the opportunity to reflect on their practice and claimed that they rarely had the opportunity to do so. I will discuss this finding in more detail in the section on the benefits of reflective dialogues. Another key finding was the isolation felt by critical educators, as they felt at odds with others in their department. In some respects, this relates to the lack of opportunities for reflection and dialogue around practice, but several participants reported feeling the need to 'fly under the radar' when it came to their critical pedagogical practice. Instead of sharing their approaches with colleagues, they often felt isolated and silenced within their departments, especially if there wasn't a critical mass of other like-minded colleagues.

Key benefits and tensions that emerged from the reflective dialogue

As with any methodology, there were both benefits and tensions that emerged from using the reflective dialogue. Key issues emerged around participation, power, language, and empowerment. Benefits included providing the opportunity for participants to reflect on their practice, re-evaluating pedagogical values and how they align with practice, and creating a space for participants to discuss critical issues.

Power
Because my study was framed by a critical research approach (Cannella & Lincoln, 2009), issues around power were very important to me and considerations of power imbalances underpinned many of my methodological decisions. This focus on power was driven by a desire to avoid getting "caught up in the paradox of attempting

to investigate and deconstruct power relations even as we are ourselves engaged in a project that creates and re-creates power accruing primarily to us" (Cannella & Lincoln, 2009: 57). Looking back, I see power as a balancing act throughout the study, there were times where I felt that it was difficult to share power and control, and other times where it may have felt tokenistic and superficial to claim that I didn't have more power than participants.

I was constantly reflecting on power dynamics throughout the research process, trying to avoid judgment and also trying to ensure that the research experience was empowering for participants rather than exploitative. Judgment may occur or be perceived when others observe or discuss practice – and although this might be important in some mentoring relationships or reflective dialogues (Rarieya, 2005), I was careful from the offset to impress on participants that I was not there to judge their practice or judge whether they are 'doing' critical pedagogy. Therefore, I framed our reflective dialogue as a chance to discuss what I had observed in their classrooms, providing an opportunity for participants to explain their decision making and actions, highlighting challenges to the practice they thought embodied a critical pedagogical approach, eliminating the need for judgment. I also hoped that my junior position within academia might help to challenge the traditional hierarchy of researcher and participant – I was approaching lecturers who were established teachers as an early career member of staff. Perhaps challenging the traditional role of the researcher as expert allowed participants to feel more comfortable to discuss issues that were important to them and their practice within the university.

Participants were also asked to bring questions or topics for discussion to the reflective dialogue to share power and ensure that they had a say in directing the flow of the dialogue.

Language
Language, and the power it imbibes, is central to framing the power dynamic between the researcher and the researched (Cannella & Lincoln, 2009; Karineli-Miller et al., 2009). This is echoed by educational philosophers Fulford and Hodgson (2016: 15), who highlight "the relationship between language and thought, and between language and action, i.e., the idea that how we speak about a thing changes the nature of that thing and what we do". The language used to describe the research process often reveals to participants the dynamic that can be expected: structured interviews are heavily influenced by the researcher, while unstructured or semi-structured are less controlled and planned. However, being aware of the language being used to frame the research caused tension and discomfort while carrying out the research and reflecting upon it. Using 'neutral' or 'empowering' language to describe research methods often felt odd or tokenistic, despite my good intentions. For example, the term 'reflective dialogue' was something I used as a way to move away from the power implications of an interview, which is commonly led by the researcher to varying degrees. When using this term, I often felt that I needed to further explain the research approach, reminding participants it was a semi-structured interview. However, this then undermined the use of different language and a different approach. There are many other techniques that attempt to restructure the interview and challenge the traditional power distance of the research process by changing the way we talk about and talk during research, such as drawing concept maps, pictures, or diagrams to guide discussion (Brown, 2019). While this is often done in an attempt to give more power and control to participants, it does not get away from the fact that the purpose and focus of the research are most often driven by the researcher (except in the cases of community and participatory-action research).

Empowering Research
For research to be empowering, it needs to move beyond using participants as informants or objects of research, instead engaging them in a research process that encourages knowledge construction and change. For research to be empowering or transformative, it must move beyond a constructivist approach to research toward a co-constructivist approach where researchers and participants construct an understanding together. According to Tierney (1994: 98-99), critical research "is meant to be transformative; we do not merely analyse or study an object to gain greater understanding, but instead struggle to investigate how individuals and groups might be better able to change their situations." Key to transformative or empowering research is engaging participants in praxis about their lived experience, while simultaneously attempting to conduct research in a way that is also empowering and not oppressive. The reflective dialogue, as well as the participant observations, in this research enabled a co-constructivist approach in which the participants and the researcher were developing an understanding of different manifestations of critical pedagogical practice together. Without the reflective dialogue, which enabled participants to better understand their situation

themselves, the participant may have been reduced to an object to be described and explained by the researcher, as expert or interpreter. Without being able to understand their own position in the world and the conditions in which they live, how can participants be expected to make changes to their situation? In this sense, without the empowering aspect of research which requires dialogue and reflexivity about the situation under study and the way that it is researched, Lather (1986) claims that research often merely uses the participants and then does nothing to empower them, despite their potential aim to do so.

Creating the opportunity for participants to reflect on and discuss their practice
Following on from the empowering potential of a study involving reflective dialogues, I found in my research that participants were grateful to have the opportunity to reflect on their practice. It seemed that my participants rarely had the time or space to reflect productively on their practice and the pedagogical values and decisions that underpinned that practice. Several participants commented on how they rarely had the opportunity to reflect on their practice, by themselves or with someone else. Many of them found this opportunity transformative to their pedagogical decision making. For example, one participant said "I think talking to you has made me realise how few opportunities we have for actually reflecting on our own teaching and evaluating things in a really useful way. I mean, we have some form of evaluation, but it doesn't get at these issues about what you're *really* trying to do". In the context of my research, using a reflective dialogue may have also raised awareness around the structural factors that were impacting their pedagogical practice and lived experience within the university. According to Knight and Saunders (1999: 144), "if we are to understand complex and taken-for-granted situations, beliefs and behaviours, the interviewer and the informant need to collaborate to construct explicit accounts on the basis of the informant's experience and tacit knowledge". By using a reflective dialogue approach, my participants and I were able to explore specific examples from the classes I observed to unpick and challenge factors at the micro, meso and macro levels of their lived experience that seemed to constrain their critical pedagogical practice.

Re-evaluating values around education and practice, checking that these align with their personal values
Creating space for reflection on practice also opened up an opportunity for participants to explore how their critical pedagogical beliefs informed or were embodied through their teaching practice. During our reflective dialogues, this often emerged as 'if-then' statements, revealing constraints at different levels that prevented them from putting their pedagogical beliefs into practice - 'if the classes were smaller I could use a more critical approach' was a common sentiment from participants. While I don't want to dismiss or trivialise the constraints that are present in the neoliberal, marketized university, discussions such as this allowed participants to see that perhaps there were ways they could push back against these constraints, even if these seemed small and insignificant, they often made a real difference to the experience of students. Many of my participants talked about doing little things that were within their power to make their classrooms more in line with their critical beliefs. This connects to the work of Skelton (2012a), who used the term 'strategic compromise' to explain the behaviour of academics whose values clash with those of their establishment. This involved "accepting structural constraints beyond one's control whilst… focusing on aspects of practice where they felt values could be realized" (Skelton, 2012a: 266). While the work of Skelton (2012a) and my findings focus on the struggle against structural constraints, at the core of this struggle is a difference in values. The values that underpin the purpose of the university and teaching within the university often differ at the macro, meso and micro levels. This difference in values also relates to the sense of isolation often felt by participants when their values or pedagogical practices differed from their colleagues or institution, sometimes leading to a sort of identity struggle for participants.

Safe space for discussing important themes/Community building
The opportunity for reflection provided by the reflective dialogue also helped participants to engage with themes around isolation, surveillance, marketisation and identity. These complicated themes were discussed in a safe space in relation to their own lived experience, providing an opportunity to consider how they had autonomy to make changes and the impact these might have on their practice, as well as their students' experience. Perhaps due to the critical/more political perspective of my participants, discussions around critical practice and challenges often linked to wider issues in higher education, such as marketisation and its impact on institutional management, student numbers, widening participation, surveillance and student engagement. It seemed that due to the isolation felt by participants it was perhaps difficult for them to explore these topics in a safe space, and a space in which they could explore constructive solutions to these issues rather than simply complaining to likeminded colleagues. This pointed to the importance of community building for participants, which was identified as important at both the meso and micro level of participants'

experience. A need for a sense of belonging and community for HE staff is not a new topic, but creating space and value for peer observation and reflective dialogues may be helpful for promoting a sense of community within institutions. However, it is worth noting that perhaps participants felt comfortable engaging in critical reflection with me because they knew that I was an 'outsider' and therefore was less likely to judge their practice. In this sense, what is a 'safe space' for some colleagues might look like a colleague from a different department, or it might be an already established community around a particular interest or way of teaching. For example, Skelton's (2012b) research on teaching identity in a research-intensive university found that when his participants couldn't identify with their colleagues and their practice, "they did not appear to have a meaningful community of practice and expressed feelings of isolation and non-belonging" (Skelton, 2012b: 36). Similarly, my participants felt that they were doing something different, and other educators in the university might not approve of what they were doing, often being tagged as one of 'the weird ones' if they used different teaching approaches. At the same time, there was also a sense that many colleagues didn't care about what others were doing in the classroom. This could be addressed by creating a space for colleagues to observe and reflect on each other's practice, and possibly creating multiple avenues for this, in order to allow colleagues to find a space for critical reflection that is truly safe and productive for them. However, I would suggest that universities should not assume that communities of practice will develop organically within programmes or teams, and instead spaces for sharing practice need to be actively developed and valued to help foster both professional development and a stronger sense of community.

Concluding Reflections/Implications for others

Reflective dialogues, whether accompanied by observation or not, can be a useful way for researchers to explore different roles and professions, revealing structural factors that may impact professionals' abilities to put their beliefs, skills, and knowledge into practice (Peel, 2005; Skelton, 2012b). Although reflection and reflexivity can be beneficial for researchers and the researched, they are also complex and challenging. First, a certain level of trust must exist within the reflective dialogue to enable a productive and critical reflection on practice – this can be a delicate balance to strike - if participants are not challenged to reflect critically on their practice, the reflective dialogue will not be productively disruptive to their way of thinking and practicing. However, if they are not in a safe space, they may not feel comfortable enough to engage in critical reflection with their interlocutor. Second, the complexities around this trust are further impacted by the willingness of educators to engage in reflection – many universities have opportunities for peer dialogue or peer observation, and yet many of these opportunities are not taken up by staff who may feel threatened by others observing or critiquing their practice. While this fear around surveillance and critique is an issue that has already been explored in both teaching more generally, and universities specifically, (see Ball, 2003; Barnett, 2016); others have explored potential ways around it, for example by implementing student-faculty partnerships to explore pedagogic practice (Cook-Sather, 2014), thus removing the 'threat' of more institutional forms of surveillance and quality assurance. While the balance between surveillance and productive critical reflection might seem difficult to strike, this does not mean that these dynamics cannot be 'productively disruptive' (Cook-Sather, 2014) and empowering. Engaging in reflective practice and asking my participants to reflect on their practice empowered them and provided a supportive environment where they felt safe to examine and interrogate their own practice. It is important, however, to recognise that those who volunteered to be part of my research may have already been open to the challenges, complexities and benefits of critical reflection, and therefore my findings around the benefits of such conversations may not be generalisable to all educators in British universities.

While this chapter has discussed the role of reflective dialogues in research, reflective dialogues can also be opportunities for educators to reflect on their own practice with a peer or part of a wider critical community. In education, reflective dialogues can be a useful form of professional development, creating an environment where colleagues support each other in improving their practice and learning new approaches and where learning and developing are seen as part of their normal working practice. These are two aspects of expansive learning environments discussed in the work of Hodgkinson and Hodgkinson (2005), who explored professional development in education and other professions. Stone (2020: 42) also explored the reflective practitioner in the context of UK teacher education, highlighting the need for teachers to "reflect constructively upon experience and theory as a way of improving the quality and effectiveness of [their] practice".

Although I used reflective dialogues to research and explore a select group of participants in English HE, reflective dialogues can be useful in a range of different contexts in and outside of education (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005). Engaging in a collaborative reflection with others about an experience or practice brings the opportunity for those reflecting to step outside of their own experience and reflect in a way that may not be possible when reflecting solo. The collaborative element not only allows for the co-construction of understanding and a reciprocal learning from experience, but also allows for a critical exploration of the structural and external factors that have influenced practice (Knight & Saunders, 1999).

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