



Unit 3: How can I find out what I need to know in the time I have? School Trainer Guidance

Introduction to learning conversations

Unit 3 suggested time 45 minutes

This unit introduces a major strategy that drives subject leadership and subject improvement. The 'learning conversation' is just that. A 10-15 minute conversation with a colleague, usually with pupil work on the table. It enables the subject leader to monitor and evaluate practice and outcomes at the same time, efficiently. Moreover, we will see later in Unit 6a that it also enables leaders to influence practice and outcomes at the same time.

Before the session, talk with the headteacher about making time for learning conversations – see the notes further down this document.

Running the session

Give colleagues this overview verbally.

Show the first video of a learning conversation in the Unit 3 Contents.

Just ask colleagues to watch and listen carefully.

Ask them:

What did we find out about this teacher's teaching and the pupils' learning in this sequence of lessons? Drill out everything that they heard and inferred.

Then ask:

What can we remember about the questions that were asked? Again, drill out the actual questions that are remembered, and their overall tone.

Show the Unit 3 video for an overview and context.


Look at the written record of the conversation you have watched.

Ask colleagues:

What does the record tell us about the leader's leadership?

What does it tell us about the teacher's teaching and pupils' achievement?

Now, pair colleagues up – preferably out of year group teams if you are a larger school. Tell them that one of them has to ask their colleague questions to find out as much as they can about a current sequence of learning in the 'questioner's' subject. If the questioner is not a subject leader, choose any subject.



Reassure them that:

- This is not role play. It is a real conversation about real teaching and learning.
- They need not worry about 'what to ask'. There are no 'wrong' questions.
- They do not need to write anything down at this stage.

Set them off on their conversation and watch the time – give them around 7-8 minutes only and then stop them all – this is a training activity.

Ask them:

If you were the questioner, how did the conversation feel?

If you were answering the questions, how did it feel?

What are they likely to say? If they do not come up with similar ideas, offer these.

If you were the questioner, how did the conversation feel?

- I had to think about the questions to ask.
- I had to listen carefully – active listening.
- I found out a lot in 8 minutes!
- There are other questions I could have asked.
- It made me think about my own practice.

If you were answering the questions, how did it feel?

- It made me reflect on my planning and teaching.
- I realised that I do know what I am doing!
- It gave me more ideas.
- Explaining myself confirmed what I am doing.


You should find that colleagues respond very positively.

Remind them that:

- Learning conversations can replace most other forms of monitoring and evaluation.
- They are quick, but deep.
- They are easy to start, and get deeper the more we do them.
- They can always be followed up by talking with pupils with their work.
- We are triangulating all the evidence sources at the same time, so this is powerful as well as supportive.
- If colleagues are unsure at any point, we will not criticise them – we will help them find a solution together.

In the Contents you will find a link to the audit document that now has questions written against each feature. These will be useful to subject leaders.

You will also find a blank record form to use.



Ask colleagues:

So, looking at you audit will show you who you might need to talk to, about what to fill in gaps. Have some conversations over the next 3-4 weeks and use the knowledge gained to fill in more detail in the audit.

There is no need to record your conversations at first – get used to holding them and start to record them when you are ready. When you do record them, please share the record with the teacher and with me (and the headteacher).

How does a school ‘find the time’ to hold learning conversations?

Talk with your headteacher about this in advance of the session.

Learning conversation is usually about 10 minutes long, and never exceed 15 minutes.

The best way to identify time for these is to cancel one staff meeting per term. This gives every teacher between one hour and one and quarter hours or more for learning conversations which they put in their ‘bank’.

They then decide who they need to talk to and when they need to talk to them and take this time off their banked time. One hour therefore enables 4 conversations per teacher, whether leading or responding.

This is a great use of time – learning conversations are intensive but supportive and inform all parties. You are unlikely to find a more productive form of professional dialogue.