

The learner at the centre

Learning conversations focus on the perspective of the learner, rather than that of the teacher. They validate the learner’s experiences and ideas, allowing the learning process to start from where the learner is, rather than where the teacher thinks they should be.

The reflective learner

Learning conversations encourage learner reflection. Such reflection can take place at many different stages during learning. Learners might reflect on:

- prior skills and knowledge
- what they want to learn and how
- how well a particular learning method worked
- what they learned
- how they could make their learning more effective.

Learner progress reviews

These are most effective when the teacher engages the learner in a learning conversation, rather than focusing on filling in review paperwork. Effective teachers help the learner to prepare for review, to clarify their aims, set targets, and identify achievements so far. The learning conversation should also enable the learner to identify barriers and find ways forward.

Motivational dialogue

This term is given to a particular kind of learning conversation that enables learners to talk about change in their lives. It supports learners facing major barriers and helps them to commit to change. Teachers require certain personal qualities, including empathy, objectivity and a non-judgemental attitude. The dialogue takes the learner through an identifiable sequence of stages, making explicit what needs to happen at each stage.

Triggers for learning conversations

Certain simple techniques can be used to create opportunities for learning conversations to develop. These might include:

- using red, amber and green cards to enable learners to indicate how they feel they are doing
- using stuck sheets to enable learners to reflect on problems and ask for help
- effective questioning, for example, asking ‘What are you finding difficult?’ rather than ‘Are you OK?’

Communication skills

Learning conversations require both teacher and learner to deploy a range of demanding speaking and listening skills including:

- using body language to build openness and trust
- active listening – including use of reflecting and summarising
- effective questioning, especially using open questions
- striving for ways to express complex ideas and ambiguities.

Quick start guide

Learning conversations

Peer-to-peer

Learning conversations are not just about teacher-to-learner interactions. Valuable learning conversations also take place between learners.

Assessment for learning

Learning conversations are part of formative assessment. They encourage learners to become experts in their own learning, articulating what they are finding difficult and what needs to happen to improve their learning.

Learning conversations

Learning conversations can take many forms, but all share a common theme: the learner is at the heart of the process. Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) envisaged the learning conversation as a scaffold to help learners reflect constructively. It has come to represent a model of working in formal, one to one situations such as reviews, where learners can reflect on their progress and decide what to do next, or where any informal constructive feedback is taking place during the learning itself. Laurillard (2000) sees learning conversations as being 'applicable to any learning situation' and she points out that the strategy must be 'discursive, adaptive, iterative and reflective' and that it must operate at task and/or topic level, meaning that it must relate to the learner's immediate context.

The purpose of the learning conversation is to:

- keep the learner at the centre and to work with their agenda
- challenge and motivate learners to improve
- enable learners to explain their progress and how far this deepens their understanding of the topic, theory or concept
- enable teachers* to explain how far learner progress fits in with overall understanding of the topic, theory or concept
- keep the learner actively engaged in analysing learning information and using it to plan their own learning and development, for example, they are able to set targets, to reflect on feedback and to carry out self-assessment
- enable the individual to become an expert learner, self-motivated and able to manage their own learning independently
- encourage the individual to become a reflective learner and to transfer skills.

* We use 'teaching and learning' and 'teacher' as generic terms to include:

- teaching, training and learning
- teachers, tutors, trainers, lecturers and instructors in the further education (FE) system.

Teachers who are most effective in this role have a specific set of personal qualities including empathy, objectivity and a non-judgemental attitude. The skills they use include active listening, effective questioning (for example, using open questions), and they adopt positive body language.

Motivational dialogue is a particular type of learning conversation that starts learners talking about change in their lives. It supports learners facing major barriers and helps them to commit to change. The approach was adopted by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Standards Unit resource: Using motivational dialogue to help E2E learners progress. It is based on research (Miller and Rollnick, 2002) into the strategies adopted by people who have successfully made significant changes in their lives. These people had two things in common:

Effective teaching and learning

- they worked through an identifiable sequence of stages of change
- they were aware of the stage they were at and what would help them at that stage.

Motivational dialogue aims to trigger intrinsic motivation, defined as 'a readiness or eagerness to carry out an action or change behaviour'. In addition to the skills and qualities described above, teachers need specific skills to help people change their behaviour.

References

Department for Education and Skills Standards Unit. (2005) *Using motivational dialogue to help learners progress*.

Laurillard, D., Stratford, M., Luckin, R., Plowman, L. and Taylor, J. (2000) *Affordances for learning in a non-linear narrative medium*. Proceedings of the American Educational Research Association Conference.

Miller, W. R. and Rollnick, S. (2002) *Motivational interviewing: preparing people for change*. 2nd ed. New York: Guilford Publications Inc.

You will find links that exemplify learning conversations in the Teaching and Learning resources.