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Middle leaders dialogic practices: facilitating professional learning for research academics in higher education settings

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ABSTRACT

Professional learning for academics is an important facet for teaching development in higher education. Facilitating this development work for research-intensive academics across different faculties is sometimes delegated to middle leaders. The practices of middle leaders in such situations where research academics have little experience or education for their role as teachers are undeniably complex. In this paper we present research examining a case study of dialogue practices encountered and promoted in a professional learning group in a higher education setting in Aotearoa New Zealand. In this case a middle leader responsible for leading professional learning created an intersubjective space where purposive dialogues helped facilitate shared learning about teaching practices for research-focused academics from the biological sciences. Analysis of the middle leader's *talk moves* demonstrates that the dialogic practices of the middle leader create conditions for establishing genuine collegial collaboration, a pedagogically focused space and tentative knowledge building. These practices allow dialogues to be responsive to participants' varied levels of experience and progress in becoming conscious of what is 'best fit practice' for their own tertiary teaching. Implications for providers of tertiary teaching development are proposed.

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Introduction

As universities across international contexts have become more focused on research-led teaching, research academics have increasingly had to produce high-impact research while simultaneously being expected to dedicate time to developing their teaching expertise (Nicolls, 2014, Prosser and Trigwell 2014). However, academic appointments in many western universities are typically oriented towards research, with individuals "assessed against research performance and their ability to show their 'fit' with the theoretical orientation of the academic department… [and the potential] to advance the discipline and the disciplinary framework (Hort 2009, p. 846). Few academics are explicitly recruited for their ability to teach, even though there is an expectation for most

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to engage in undergraduate teaching. In many instances, research-academics, except for those in teacher education, have little or limited preparation for their teaching role. As Lamon *et al.* (2024) note 'close to 40% of all new academics in health and biomedical sciences' felt 'ill-prepared and received no formal or informal education nor induction to teaching and learning theories or practices before starting to teach' (p. 8). Therefore, it is not surprising that 'academics identify first with their discipline, and then with their department' (Patrick and Lines 2004, p. 31), with an identity as an educator not often featuring into their self-perception. This is reinforced as research-academics quickly learn that university systems tend to reward them for their research performance (e.g. grant funding success, publication metrics, international awards) over recognition of excellence in teaching (Hardy and Smith 2006, Rich 2009).

For the research-academic, undertaking a programme of PL[1] focused on teaching requires time away from their preferred research-oriented work, e.g. laboratory-based research, grant writing and publishing (Rich 2009, Spronken□Smith and Walker 2010). It is the equivalent of asking researchers to develop a new (perhaps dual) identity as tertiary-educators, 'or alternatively and preferably, one professional identity as a scholar, generally within a discipline-based profession' (Shephard *et al.* 2020, p. 207). Designing PL to enhance the teaching capabilities of research- academics challenges those responsible to consider approaches that effectively promote a shift in pedagogical thinking and practice.

Professional learning in higher education

The forms of PL for research-academics in higher education vary across institutions. Typical approaches which support the teaching development of academics include, for example, attending workshops or conferences, work or project-based learning, engagement in learning communities, reading relevant literature, peer observations, or conversations with colleagues (Avard and Saliba 2018, King, 2004). More formally, tertiary teaching PL is aligned with a strategic agenda and led by established centres/units, and a growing number of universities have extended their postgraduate tertiary teaching qualification offerings (e.g. Grad Cert or Post Grad Cert in tertiary teaching). Such initiatives aim to contribute to a pathway for academics to attain higher-level qualifications, positions, and recognition (e.g. Higher Education Academy Fellowship in the UK). However, as King (2004) notes 'reward and recognition schemes within institutions still tend to focus solely on the quality of teaching outcomes rather than on the professional learning process that enabled them' (p. 170). Aligned with Teräs (2016) we argue that PL for research-academics needs to move beyond simply providing 'more information about teaching and learning … or new teaching techniques' (p. 260) through modularised 'training' practices. Contrasting these approaches a range of approaches, including communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), mentoring circles (Darwin and Palmer 2009), or dialogue circles (Edwards-Groves *et al.* 2024) have been used to provide spaces for educators to work collaboratively to developing their tertiary teaching practice. While the power of dialogic spaces (Wood and Su 2014) or communicative spaces (Edwards-Groves 2013) have been advocated for as a legitimate form of PL for those working in higher education, Sinnayah *et al.* (2024) and Thomson and Barrie (2021) note that there continues to be limited opportunities for busy academics to engage in

facilitated dialogic conversations about teaching in day-to-day practice when university contexts give primacy to research work.

We recognise that with the current pressures of university funding it unlikely that any centralised unit 'is likely to be large enough to provide ongoing dialogical support across the university' and instead resort to dispensing 'their resources by providing short-term teaching development projects and central activities in which individuals participate' (McNaught 2005, p. 37). Therefore, middle leaders may be best placed, or required to, provide a more sustained programme of PL in the form of dialogic conversations to enhance teaching and learning for their colleagues.

The middle leader as a facilitator of pl

Research on the practices of middle leader's responsible for facilitating professional learning among their colleagues is gaining momentum across the world (Harris *et al.* 2019, Grootenboer *et al.* 2015, Maddock 2023). However, research on middle leaders is predominantly located in primary and secondary education sites, and although middle leaders exist in tertiary settings, they are rarely the focus of research. In tertiary settings, a middle leader is often considered as those leaders with largely administration and management roles, typically with positional titles such as Head/Chair of Department, Chair of Schools, Programme Leaders (Maddock 2023). After Grootenboer *et al.* (2015), we extend this definition to focus on those in an acknowledge position of leadership but also have a significant teaching role.

Unlike in school settings, a unique challenge in tertiary contexts is that the middle leaders (as in those named above) who have overarching responsibility for supporting, advising and possibly 'monitoring' the teaching of their colleagues, may have themselves little or no formal education or background in teaching. Consequently, the middle leaders who are relied on to promote and or provide formalised PL associated with the development of teaching practice may come from other organisational units in the university, e.g. predominantly centres or units focused on tertiary teaching and learning. As a result, middle leaders may not come from the same discipline as those they are supporting, and PL configured in this way can therefore be viewed by research-academics as a time-consuming 'add-on' lead by 'educationalists' not vested in the discipline (King 2004). This creates unique circumstances for the practices required of those middle leaders expected to provide support for 'experienced' research academics as they develop their teaching practices.

Furthermore, middle leaders in higher education are required to balance the 'the difficult work of challenging accepted practices in order to develop the conditions that can genuinely enrich teachers' learning' (Groundwater-Smith *et al.* 2012, p.88); this, we argue, benefits from a shift towards more dialogic approaches. Moving PL experiences towards dialogicality requires facilitating PL for colleagues beyond notions of adopting 'predetermined solutions' that are not site or disciplinary specific, or at a level reflective of the varied expertise of the participants. It is recognised that this takes time and is often at odds with the current pressures of university funding that make it more unlikely that any centralised unit 'is likely to be large enough to provide ongoing dialogical support across the university', and instead resort to dispensing 'their resources by providing short-term teaching development projects and central activities in which individuals

participate' (McNaught 2005, p. 37). This added complexity means that the middle leaders who hope to use dialogical approaches when providing PL opportunities need to have an understanding of how their practices create conditions where colleagues have opportunities for engaging deeply with the thinking of others, recognising and expanding their own and others' insights, and by challenging the ideologies, theories and practical propositions they are encountering.

While previous research has explored middle leader's dialogic practices in leading PL in school settings (Edwards-Groves *et al.* 2019, Stone and Stone 2024), rarely have we seen research that explicitly focuses on the dialogic practices of middle leaders as providers of PL in university contexts. This paper draws on an empirical study to explore the pivotal role one middle leader's *talk moves* (Edwards-Groves 2014b) played in creating conditions for professional dialogues that offer research academics 'safe learning spaces in which taking risks is acceptable, thereby facilitating the exploration of gaps and challenges in their understanding and practice' (Hofmann 2019, p. 214) of tertiary teaching. As a result, the dialogic practices of middle leaders work as facilitators of PL largely remains taken-for-granted.

Background

This research emerged from the implementation of a new programme of work to introduce a new cross-disciplinary Bachelor of Health (BHealth) at the first author's university (hereafter referred to as the middle leader) in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). The middle leader was responsible for this curriculum development and worked closely with colleagues from across ten university schools[2] as they collaboratively designed the qualification. As part of this work, it was determined that students in the BHealth would benefit from consistent pedagogical approaches as they moved across disciplinary fields. This decision led to the academics who taught in the undergraduate biomedical science papers[3] expressing a desire to enhance their own teaching practices to promote students' learning'. The middle leader was invited to work with this group given she already had an established relationship with them from her leadership in the development of the BHealth, but also their recognition that as a teacher educator she might know more about pedagogy than they did. The collaboration provided the opportunity to extend the teaching practices of leading biological science researchers, bridging the research-teaching nexus typically pervading the structural arrangements of a tertiary institution (Robertson 2007).

While the premise of the collective endeavour was to support research academics to engage in sustained dialogues to inform and transform their teaching, the middle leader also saw the opportunity to building a culture of collaboration and critical colleagueship through focused PL conversations. Having facilitated PL conversations as part of a variety of leadership roles the middle leader proceeded with the first 13 conversations without consciously considering her own dialogic practices. She had previous, examined their own interviewing practices (Petrie 2005) and recognised the importance of active listening. However, as the PL conversations progressed it became apparent that critically examining how her own dialogic practices as a middle leader afforded researcher academics the space to develop their thinking and practices in and about tertiary teaching and learning, might be helping in furthering understandings of dialogic practices in HE.

This paper, therefore, focuses how this middle leader's taken-for-granted dialogic practices supported the PL for her colleagues, and the implications for how middle leaders as providers of PL in higher education may consider their own talk moves in dialogic approaches to PL. While in this paper, we focus on the work of a middle leader as she provided PL opportunities for her colleagues, we recognise that the findings could provide other providers of PL in higher education (e.g. those working in Centres for Tertiary Teaching) with some points for consideration as they too work across disciplinary divides, and with research academics and colleagues that may be perceived to be of a higher academic status.

The project

The following question guided the aspect of the project reported in this paper: *In what ways do the dialogic practices used by a middle leader create conditions for professional learning in higher education?* A key aim was to study the nature and influence of the dialogues between group members, and specifically on ways the taken-for-granted talk moves of the middle leader promoted learning about teaching.

The group included six biological sciences researchers, two established education researchers (including the middle leader), and a colleague from the USA of one of the biological scientists who joined the group by zoom. The academics varied in age (from 28 to 63 years), were appointed as lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors, or professors. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Data collection

Data collection involved audio-recorded PL sessions facilitated by the middle leader beginning in 2020, when the NZ participants were in 'lockdown' in response to governmental policy for managing COVID. Initially meetings occurred online. However, as the group transitioned out of the COVID restrictions they began to meet face-to-face on campus, usually during the day. The international partner always joined via zoom. Meeting dates and times were negotiated among the participants. Attendance was voluntary, and participation was fluid as the academics also managed their teaching and research workloads. At least six participants were present at each meeting.

Across 2020–2023, the group met formally on 13 occasions, with the frequency greater in 2020 (six meetings) when the collaboration was in its infancy. By 2023, the group only officially met twice, but had more informal 'coffee' catchups or brief chats in passing. The informal gatherings sustained the discussions between meetings. Over the three-year period the middle leader took responsibility for organising meetings and the agenda. Topics arose from matters rolled over from previous meetings, new initiatives or expectations 'mandated' by university leadership, or from incidental topics of interest or relevance arising from informal interactions.

Data are comprised of a set of the 13 transcripts made from the recorded collegial discussions (representing approximately 25 hours of meeting time). The audio-recorded meetings were transcribed as word-only records of the actual discursive production of the talk-in-interaction (Heritage and Drew, 1992, Freiberg and Freebody 1995). The transcripts formed the texts for analysis which involved the close and continual

examination of the participants and middle leader's talk moves. Of interest were the ways the middle leader moved the conversation towards greater opportunities for participants to expand their own repertoires of teaching practices.

Data analysis

Coding and theme generation was guided initially by close interaction analysis (Keyton 2018) and followed by deductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). This provided a method to systematically apply pre-existing theoretical understandings about dialogism to the data. To identify and make explicit the talk moves of the middle leader, we drew on the work of Skidmore (2020), whose writing is underpinned by the theories extolled by Bakhtin (1895–1975), and the Bakhtin Circle (Brandist 2002). Skidmore's three dimensions of the *sphere of dialogue* helped inform our conceptualisation of how the middle leader's talk moves determined 'the possibility for constructing mutual understanding and collaborative practice' (Skidmore 2020, p. 27). In the sphere of dialogue model, three poles - *Dialogic-Monologic, Homophonic – Polyphonic*, and *Heteroglossia – Orthoglossic* - form the representations of variance in the modes of address or poles. In brief they can be understood as:

(1) *Monologic-Dialogic* modes of address or poles focusing on the practices of a particular interlocuter. At the dialogic end the interlocuter established conditions that more resemble 'everyday conversations between peers [where the talk moves] invite a response from other participants, and it is understood that anyone may contribute to the unfolding exchange of talk throughout its duration' (Skidmore 2020, p. 28). In contrast, the monologic frames conversations as a 'sit and listen', where other participants are treated as recipients of information through transmission, informings or a 'speech'.
(2) *Homophonic-Polyphonic* poles relate to issues of power/authority and how turn-taking is managed. PL framed more in line with homophonic dialogic practices would centre on the middle leader orchestrating and mediating all contributions, and in essence calling on individuals to offer a response to a direct question. In contrast creating conditions for polyphonic discussion 'everyone is expected to contribute to the discussion and to be given a chance to voice their opinion on the problem or topic at issue'. This relates to opening spaces for 'many-voiced' discourses, where there are alternative perspectives or disagreements presented the role of the middle leader is one that creates conditions which allow participants to work through their varying positions to potentially form common understandings or accept the varied perspectives. As a pedagogical approach, polyphonic practices are a …. "form of interactivity, something that happens 'between various consciousnesses, that is, their interaction and interdependence" (Bakhtin, 1929/1984, p 36 as cited in Skidmore 2020).
(3) *Heteroglossia – Orthoglossic* poles span the idea that the heteroglot (for example the research-academic) brings with them an everyday understanding of concepts such as teaching, learning or pedagogy that is framed by their previous experiences and the limited PL they may have had. In contrast, orthoglossic refers to the

use of the specialised language practices of an academic discipline, in this instance being discourses associated with educational practices.

Viewing dialogism through the sphere of dialogic practices necessitated a close examination of the 'happeningness' (Kemmis *et al.* 2014) of a middle leader's dialogic practices in leading PL. This provided a way for the analyst to uncover the often taken-for granted talk moves, and scope to show how these create productive conditions that enable PL for research-academics.

Given the first authors role in the dialogic conversations, the analysis was undertaken in partnership with the second author to provide a distanced perspective for exploring the practices of the middle leader. This approach acted as a mechanism to avoid a tendency to offset bias and be drawn into examining what the middle leader was intending, as opposed to what actually happened as a practice.

Since a central focus of the study was to understand the nature and influence of a middle leader's dialogic practices for supporting research academics develop their teaching practices, it was important that the focus of analysis began with the level of participant turns and exchanges. In the first instance, relevant extracts of recorded and transcribed data were delineated in line with Skidmore's conceptualisation of dialogism. These data formed an organisational framework (Grootenboer and Edwards-Groves 2024) from which to update and refine codes as new content emerged in subsequent iterations of analysis.

This process provided scope to identify productive '*talk moves*' between the middle leader and group participants over the course of their conversations. Through the iterative analytic process, a number of interdependent facets of dialogicality emerged that provide some insights into how a middle leader talk moves create conditions for colleagues' PL. It is not possible within this paper to provide extended extracts from across the full data set, especially given the extensive dialogue that ensued across the 13 meetings. Therefore, we have identified and shared extracts that are representative of the reoccurring talk moves employed by the middle leader from across the transcripts.

Findings

Analysis revealed three predominant middle leader talk moves that appeared to create conditions that enabled research-focused academics' PL about tertiary teaching practices. First, moves that created conditions allowing for collegiality; second, the explicit development of a pedagogical space requires focusing and refocusing talk moves, and thirdly and simultaneously, those moves allowing participants to feel comfortable to be publicly 'testing' their tentative understandings (knowledge) among peers.

Establishing a genuinely dialogic space for building collegiality

It was evident that in facilitating the PL conversations, the middle leader began with establishing conditions that created a dialogic space (as opposed to monologic), that allowed for a multiplicity of voices (polyphonic orientation) where multiple perspectives and experiences were encouraged. For example, in the extract that opened the first meeting the middle leader established 'the rules of the game' (colloquially speaking), by

'putting on the table' (making overt) the conditions for dialogue and the multiplicity of voices and perspectives. These notions formed practice arrangements[4] which underpinned the ways talk moves for this group were connected to generating collegiality, orientations evident in the middle leaders' use of the second person pronouns 'us' and 'we' (italicised).

ML: I guess the challenge here is how *we* work this in a way where everyone gets to have a part, everyone gets to do some thinking, there are really robust discussion and dialogue and you've got to evidence your position and things like that, without it being one person's agenda. That is something I guess, is a challenge on any of these things, but just wanted to put it out there on the table. *We* can think about how *we* build a sense of inclusivity.

In introducing the purposes and ways of working at the outset of the initiative, the middle leader establishes that the meetings will be a collective endeavour rather than 'one persons' agenda'. In her comments, the middle leader makes suggestions orienting to building 'a sense of inclusivity' which might unfold in the meetings in terms of 'everyone' having a part, doing some thinking, participating in robust discussion and dialogue, and providing evidence from their own practice. As she continued, the middle leader sustained this position about her role in 'facilitating' dialogue.

ML: I just want to be facilitating it and prompting, pushing for deeper kind of thinking around some stuff, or keeping us a bit on track because the tendency would be to go completely in different directions. So yes, I just want to put some of those things on the table per se and see if there were any thoughts from any of you around particular ways of working, with things that we need to know collectively, so that we can make this work well.

By explicitly naming the features of facilitating as being about 'prompting, pushing for deeper kind of thinking around some stuff, or keeping us a bit on track', the middle leader orients participants towards dialogic and polyphonic modes. These extracts, although appearing as monologic in that the middle leader was setting up the discussion protocols through tellings or informings, the ground was set for the possibility for dialogue, as shown in what happens as the conversion unfolded. Next, in his response to the middle leader's suggestion, Hamish is clearly attuned to the direction being established by the middle leader evidenced in his extension of her point.

Hamish: Well, as the outsider and I do not know you guys as well as you know each other, my experience with these kinds of groups is just to verbalise that it is okay to disagree and it is okay to even argue about something as long as it does not become personal, right. So, you can argue with the idea but not the person. I think we have to be able to disagree with each other if we are going to really make progress and push back and forth. Otherwise, it would just be window dressing, and then you wind up having people saying, 'Well, I am not doing that, and what is the point then?'

Here, Hamish reinforces the shared the responsibility of a dialogic orientation by drawing attention to the notion that multiple perspectives (polyphonic), accepts disagreement, but adds further parameters about what this means in interaction; that is, 'you can argue with the idea but not the person'. Hamish's assertion that if multiple ideas, even

in the form of disagreements, is not part of the conversation, then it is 'just window dressing.'

Reinforcing dialogic and polyphonic modes, was a feature of talk moves in the opening each meeting. The next extract, the introduction to Meeting 2, exemplifies how the middle leader reiterated and extended points regarding dialogicality by indicating a shared responsibility for question asking, and in doing so implicitly infers the notion of power-sharing as a central practice of a polyphonic mode.

ML: I do not want to be the only one asking the questions. I think the challenge here is that you ask as many questions of each other as you do with me. . .. where do we want to start? If people want to think ahead and go, okay, this is where I am keen to go next with that, we can then pull some of those ideas together.

Across extracts from the initial meetings and subsequent meetings, it was evident that the middle leader's talk moves framed the importance of establishing and maintaining the kaupapa[5] (ways of working, familiar in the discourses of these New Zealand educators) of the meetings that would support the collegiality, inclusivity and a shared sense of responsibility necessary for PL conversations.

Equally, the disciplinary differences between the middle leader (as education researcher/teacher) and the other group participants (scientists), alongside the variation in career stages (academic positions) necessitated talk moves that helped create conditions that demonstrated dialogicality. This meant talk that showed the value of shared expertise, acceptance of multi-voiced perspectives regardless of position, and what this meant for their shared endeavours and responsibility. An example of this is presented in the following extract from later in Meeting 10, where the middle leader's talk moves open the space for others to share their perspectives.

ML: I feel we have talked about the two, those who are engaged and those are not. When you are talking about engagement what do you actually mean by engaged? Because I can think of some of our top students are very engaged, but they are engaged in nailing it for the test. They are not actually engaged in learning in the board of seats or learning to think like scientists or whatever. What do you mean by engaged?

Ewan: I mean different things to what **you** mean.

ML: That is why I am asking the question because I can see really engaged A-students who are actually only engaged to get the A, they are not actually engaged as great thinkers. They are not going to be the people that really move things on and I can see some of my really disengaged students who are actually might be thinkers, if you really probe them, they think in the way that I would like more students to think. They are just not interested in anything we are doing. What does engage mean, what does it look like? That is the part that it does not matter if we are talking about science students or foreign students or health students, whatever, what is engaged, what does it mean for someone to be engaged?

Jonny: I think the engagement means the same thing across all boards. It is just the motivation for their engagement that changes.

Ewan: The part of the course where I usually see engagement and see what students are like is in labs. When you get to see how they are thinking and how they are doing things which at the moment we are not getting because we do not see them. The other way, at the moment, is through tutorials . . .. If they are asking questions, that to me is an indication of engagement.

In contrast to a more typical 'teaching' pattern where talk is homophonic and or monologic where participant contributions are tightly mediated by the middle leader as the PL lead, the above extract could be viewed as aligned with the dialogic and polyphonic poles of Skidmore's model. For example, Ewan's statement, 'I mean different things to what you mean' provokes the chain of different explanations. Across the sequence, the different participants subsequently produce multiple perspectives on the notions of engagement, for instance, student motivation, evident in activity in labs, and questioning. It could be argued that the initial middle leader questioning talk move in this sequence supported the establishment of a genuine collegial space through the creation of social-political conditions for a highly dialogic endeavour. The middle leader's talk moves show evidence of inviting many-voices to contribute (a polyphonic discourse) in a manner more reflective of everyday dialogue between peers, all who bring their own expertise to the unfolding exchanges of conversation. It should, however, be noted that in the second contribution the middle leader becomes somewhat more monologic, as she talks more through tellings or informings, although in a manner that it could be argued still attempts to open the door for further input from multiple voices.

Establishing a focused pedagogical space

Across the transcripts it was evident that to create the conditions necessary to move from homophonic (middle leader as orchestrator of all aspects of the talk, positioning them as authority), the middle leader utilised talk moves that involved active listening *in practice*. Here there was evidence that they focused on hearing and responding to participants' perspectives, in order to frame the next talk move. A distinctive pattern in the talk moves of the middle leader emerged whereby the middle leader introduced, promoted, contextualised and sustained the pedagogical focus during and across the PL conversations. At times this involved the middle leader deliberately avoiding giving 'the' or 'an' answer; rather she problematised her own pedagogical practices as an example, elaborating on a perspective offered rather than evaluating it, or prompt with further questions. This pattern of withholding used by middle leader consistently featured four talk moves, which we have classified and present in Table 1.

All four features of the talk moves were present throughout the dialogue in each meeting. Although the pattern, typically followed the same sequence, there were times

Table 1. Establishing and sustaining the pedagogical focus.

Reflect/Restate (R)	A synthesis of the collective comments of the participants preceding dialogue
Preformulate (P)	A loose 'orientating' question (to focus the thinking)
Example (E)	Offering an example from her own teaching, or an elaboration of an idea
Question (Q)	Prompt to 'direct' the next phase of conversation

the preformulate [P] and example [E] sequences were flipped. Equally, sometimes all features were evident when the middle leader spoke, but on other occasions they appeared across multiple turns. The extract below from Meeting 2 shows how this 'focusing' sequence unfolds in the course of a series of exchanges that reprised points from the first meeting about engagement.

ML: **[R]** So, if we see them engaged in labs, and by engaged, I am taking it to be more motivated, asking more questions, inquiring, engaging with others, and maybe debating things. **[P]** I do not know what it quite looks like. And that does not happen in other learning opportunities, be that tuts or lectures. **[E]** Is there stuff, if we think about our aspirations for what learning in sciences looks like and involves, that we can take from that and think about, in the way we think about lectures, and lectures is an appalling term. But also noting that, if you have got hundred and seventy [students], that adds some challenges. **[Q]** So, what does that mean, and how does it get framed? So, if our aspirations are that students are engaged as learners in every opportunity, including assessment, what does that mean? What does it look like?

Hector: Well, if we were to take Lily's observations, which I agree with, and we had the same level engagement in the lecture, as we had in the labs, then we would have a lot more questions, and we would have a lot more interaction between the students themselves.

The talk moves of reflecting, preformulating, exemplifying, and questioning were demonstrative of dialogism since the talk moves responded to the social context of academics meeting to discuss and learn about teaching. The polyphonic practices of the middle leader allowing for multiple perspectives to be shared whilst avoiding silencing any individual's perspectives was necessary to progress participant thinking and line of conversation in ways that also tied the threads of diverse ideas from the group together. This middle leader actions appeared to provide a way to sustain the dialogue and maintain the focus, while challenging thinking without judgement and refraining from dominating the conversation. Equally, the middle leader used shared language about teaching and learning that was familiar to or used by the science academics (heteroglots), and in this way that invited the participants to begin to develop more specialist thinking and talking about pedagogy.

Establishing conditions for knowledge building through valuing tentativeness

In contrast to an approach that suggests the middle leader has the 'answer' or a 'predetermined solution' (Groundwater-Smith *et al.* 2012), across the transcripts it became evident that the middle leader consistently attempted to establish conditions for what we have termed *tentative knowledge building*. The talk moves modelled the idea that she was working alongside the scientists as opposed to being a disconnected 'expert'. This was demonstrated in her sharing her own efforts to trial, and fail, when she was exploring new pedagogical approaches for example. Such an approach contrasts with PL where the lead facilitator talks at the 'recipients' in ways that are more monologic (telling others what they need to know/do) and homophonic (possessing all the power).

In the following example (over 12 months into the project) the middle leader, shares an example of her own attempt to use quizzes in the student learning platform. Note that the language used is not specialised (orthoglossic), in terms of education broadly or pedagogical theory but instead reflective of the way the other participants talk about teaching.

Rachel: Everything [classes] is recorded. I've got a cohort that ten students are watching the recording within twenty-four-hours. . . . But that brings me up to just over half the class. The cohort, they are not engaging at all. That is my concern.

ML: Because we tried this week, roughly, because we are asynchronous. So, we filmed the lecture, a built quizzes into the lecture. A bit rough but anyhow, we fessed up to students throughout the lecture, 'I think this is going to work but we will see how it goes.' . . ., in the roughest sense of the word smooth, so we won't be looking at those. . .. It is rough as guts, and not like in a lecture theatre. . . So, it was my one piece of learning for the week, hopefully, it makes the lecture more interactive, not that they are more interactive. But they—

Lily: So, are they on Moodle?

ML: That was a Panopto. I just recorded my Panopto. And I am not showing you that. It is uncomfortable (several overlapping turns, inaudible).

Rowland: So does that mean we can set that up because we are giving out all lectures of the week for Friday. . . That means by the time the tutorials are around you have a sense of how many people have done it. And also, what is working? And what is not? Because if you are all struggling with a certain question, they all got it wrong then we might be like we need to cover it.

ML: It did force me to think about how I write questions, pretty low level. It was the first one I have done, so by next week I guess I will see.

Lily: We have quizzes available, but they are just optional for students who want to do them. . . they can go and do them if they want to teach themselves. But they don't have to – they are there, so putting them in is a good idea.

ML: Yeah, it forced them so they could not move on through the lecture until they have done them. But you do not have to, you can go through the lecture without having to do them.

Rowland: I sat down with Emma to look, and you can actually force them to do a quiz, and then they have to have done the previous task, but this sounds a lot more seamless, and they don't have to go in and out of the lecture

Here, the middle leader's description of her own lack of success with trialling new and 'proven' pedagogical approaches appeared to create the conditions that allow others to also share their attempts, success and failings, without judgement. This approach made it

possible for other participants to feel that this was an acceptable space for declaring tentativeness, which in turn, opened the possibilities for individual and collective knowledge building. As the meeting progressed (and in subsequent meetings), others shared their own challenges; for instance, Lily declared she is struggling with designing material, Hector confessed that he has agonised over the delivery of past lectures, or Rachel spoke about the time it takes to prepare. These examples suggesting that the practice of the middle leader verbalising her own openness to uncertainty, modelled ways to manage the discomfort of not knowing (her own and that of her colleagues). This created conditions that enabled others to feel increasingly comfortable in testing ideas and acknowledging what was and was not working. Equally, in sharing her lived experiences of success, trial, and failure it appeared to diminish the 'expert – non-expert' divide and allowed others to feel safe to engage in *exploratory talk* (Barnes 1992) as they came to think and talk about their own, each other's, and the middle leader's pedagogical practices. The establishment of conditions valuing tentative knowledge building seems to have fostered an understanding that there is no such thing as best practice but practices 'best fit' for each site, forming a site ontological view of the notion of best practice (Grootenboer and Edwards-Groves 2024). Overall, the analysis of meetings revealed that at the outset the middle leader's dialogic, polyphonic talk moves supported the creation of a space for tentative knowledge building.

The perceived value of dialogic discussions

This next extract, from a meeting 18 months into the project, illustrates how the practices of the middle leader created conditions that enabled this group of research academics to engage in dialogic discussions that, in turn, promoted PL about their teaching.

Ewan: Yeah. It's hard, it's hard for us to teach when we've not been trained to teach.

Rowland: It's also the combination of scientists and non-scientists, at least for us, is good to have that.

Hector: Yeah, well but as scientists we're not experts. Right. And so, we need, we need some 'experts' [emphasised with laughter] to tell us.

Ewan: I think the important thing has been other perspectives. 'Cause we all have the scientific perspective. We all have this thing about delivering content and delivering information and, and middle leader [named here] had that other approach where she's doesn't have that. She's not hung upon content like we are and can, um, ask subtle questions to direct us [laughter]. It's been really good to have this, this time when we've actually sat down and talked about different ideas and different approaches and what's worked and what hasn't worked. And it kind of helps give you confidence to change things. . . . And not be pressured to change things all at once. That it's not (pause). . . it's not going from one to the other straight away. It's an evolution. Get biology word in that. An evolution of the change in how we're doing things.

Ewan's comments suggest the dialogical practices of the middle leader were instrumental in creating these conditions. As Ewan acknowledged, open communicative spaces where he and his colleagues were able to actively participate in PL conversations that involve engaging thinking of others, recognising and expanding their own and others' insights, provided a process to address issues of change (Kemmis *et al*. 2014, Grootenboer and Edwards-Groves 2024).

With a dialogic analysis lens applied, it became evident that the conditions established through the middle leader's talk moves allowed participants time to play with their understandings at a level that worked for them, not framed around set outcomes or a specific agenda. It could be argued that there was a doubleness in the dialogic moves/work of the middle leader, in that not only was she supporting the participants to extend their own and other's understandings of pedagogical approaches, but also the middle leader modelled questioning (prompting, challenging and extending), eliciting multiple perspectives, and establishing inquiry as pedagogical strategies. Across the meetings, alongside the pattern of RPEQ, also modelled were dialogic pedagogies of inquiry, the value of shared expertise, utilisation prompts to get participants to elaborate, acceptance of multiple answers that allow for site specific and personal experience, whilst challenging and extending research academics own understandings about pedagogy.

What is evidenced is the role of dialogicality in creating conditions for the professional learning of others and in this instance supporting the pedagogical development of science research academics. The middle leaders' role is to create conditions that support learners (heteroglots) 'to "try out" new, specialised ways of talking and thinking (the orthoglossia of the discipline), to make connections between these and their everyday knowledge of the world and to experiment and risk mistakes in their developing understanding of the subject' (Skidmore, p.30). The middle leader, as a PL partner, can be a conduit for the research academics to move beyond their lived experience and their everyday language of education (heteroglossia), to develop familiarity with the language of pedagogy (teaching, learning, assessment) at a theoretical level (orthoglossic).

Leading professional learning in higher education

Across higher education settings middle leaders play a key role in the PL of their colleagues, alongside those whose primary responsibility is PL as staff in 'centres' for teacher tertiary teaching. In sharing this research our intent is not to suggest that this middle leader's work is in anyway a model of best practice, in attempting such would be contrary to the intent of our work. Instead, we believe it is important to recognise that the dialogic practices evidenced by this middle leader work for her in this particular site, with this group of research academics. In revealing the taken-for-granted dialogic practices of this middle leader there is the opportunity to consider how this might be useful in shaping how other middle leaders and those working in higher education PL, might reflect on their own practices.

For those responsible for delivery of PL, we believe this research signals two important considerations. Firstly, developing a meta-awareness of our own dialogic practices and how these create conditions for the learners we are working with, can support us to become more effective as facilitators of professional learning. Regardless of the nature of the PL we are providing, whether it's dialogic conversations in a community of practice,

project-based learning, peer observations, or module delivery, our modes of dialogue can influence how research academics perceive its value. These interactions can either encourage them to see PL as meaningful and relevant or lead them to view it as an additional burden that detracts from their primary work as researchers. Of particular note, attention to our modes of dialogue using Skidmore's (2020) model could help us recognise how our practices align to more towards *dialogic, polyphonic* approaches, which appear to be more conducive for learners and adult learners in particular (Edwards-Groves 2014b). In the same way we ask them to develop a sense of the particular class or group with whom they are working and of the lessons, a unique meeting of voices between this tutor and this set of learners that is taking place right now, in the present moment (Skidmore 2020), we to need to consider our own practices.

Secondly, our role as middle leaders or PL partners in higher education settings is to provide a path for research academics less familiar with pedagogy to begin got make sense of what is unfamiliar. It is unreasonable to expect those who have never been taught to teach to understand the specialised language (orthoglossic forms of speech) of pedagogy as they undertake PL, especially if they are engaging infrequently or only in response to university requirements. Instead, we need to ensure of dialogic practices create conditions that allow them to make connections between what they know from their previous experiences (often as students) and what might be new and possible. This also involves establishing conditions where they feel safe to take risks, feel uncertain, and test new ideas. For us this means, using dialogic practices that allow for the establishment of genuinely collegial spaces, pedagogical focused, while still allow for tentative knowledge building.

While asking middle leaders, and others to consider their own dialogic practices, we also believe, in line with previous research (Edwards-Groves 2014a, Skidmore 2020) it is important to reinforce the *value of dialogic conversations as PL*. As analysis showed in this study, these allowed this group of research academics to develop their understandings about teaching and learning in a way that was responsive to their own needs and readiness for learning. The continuity of the conversations, where conditions for collegiality and tentative knowledge building about pedagogy were established by the middle leader, allowed this group of scientists to 'evolve' their individual and shared practices, with 'confidence' and without 'feeling pressure'. Equally, these conditions worked to help sustain their engagement across multiple years, and for informal dialogue about their teaching to continue beyond the life of the project. A challenge for universities more widely, is how to encourage research academics to see the value in sustained dialogic conversations about teaching as PL when all other messages may suggest that research outputs or conversations about research are what is most valued. While in this instance, the opportunity was though invitation, further research may help us understand what practice arrangements may enable wider use of dialogic conversations to become a more common form of PL for research academics in tertiary settings.

Conclusion

While engaging in PL to inform teaching is not always the focus for research academics, mountaining pressures in universities to ensure high quality teaching occurs across all programmes, places higher expectations on middle leaders and others involve in PL to

meet the needs to all tertiary teachers. In an attempt at making explicit the taken-for-granted dialogic practices of one middle leader, we have provided a chance to examine how the 'happeningness' of practices can create productive conditions that enable PL about teaching for research-academics. Regardless of our role in the development or delivery of PL in tertiary education, this work reminds us that what we have as much responsibility to examine and learn about our own practices, as we do in asking those we work with to develop theirs.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, we use the term *professional learning* to capture Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and Professional Development (PD).
2. The term 'school' is used in this context to represent a disciplinary grouping framed in relation to the focus of research and teaching that takes place for the group of academic staff 'housed' together. In other contexts, this group may be called a department, a faculty, or by some other term.
3. At this university a paper is the equivalent of one course (15 credits – 150hrs of taught/independent study). A typical programme would be made up of eight papers per year.
4. Here we use the phrase practice arrangements as it is articulated in the Theory of Practice Architectures (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008, Kemmis *et al.* 2014). It is not within the scope nor intent of this paper to provide further explanation of this theory, which is more clearly articulated in the aforementioned readings of in Grootenboer and Edwards-Groves (2024).
5. *Kaupapa* is a Māori word understood and used by the participants concerning ways of working.

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Ethics statement

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