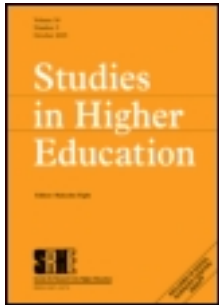


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Torgny Roxå^a & Katarina Mårtensson^a

^a Centre for Educational Development, Lund University, P.O. Box 118, SE-221 00 Lund, Sweden

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Significant conversations and significant networks – exploring the backstage of the teaching arena

Torgny Roxå and Katarina Mårtensson*

Centre for Educational Development, Lund University, P.O. Box 118, SE-221 00 Lund, Sweden

This article presents an inquiry into conversations that academic teachers have about teaching. The authors investigated to whom they talk and the forms that these conversations take. The findings indicate that most teachers rely on a small number of significant others for conversations that are characterised by their privacy, by mutual trust and by their intellectual intrigue. Individual teachers seem to have small ‘significant networks’, where private discussions provide a basis for conceptual development and learning, quite different from the ‘front stage’ of formal, public debate about teaching. Individual teachers seem to have more significant conversations and larger networks where the local culture is perceived to be supportive of such conversations. The findings are interpreted in relation to socio-cultural theories, and have clear implications for the development of teaching.

Introduction

There is evidence in the literature that academic teachers are better teachers if they pay close attention to their students’ learning, and reflect about and design teaching with the students’ learning in focus, rather than if they put the teaching activity first (Prosser and Trigwell 1999; Martin et al. 2000; Ho, Watkins, and Kelly 2001; Entwistle and Peterson 2004). There is also an established link between teachers’ conceptions about teaching and learning, and the quality outcome of student learning. These conceptions range from teachers who are mainly concerned with how to display disciplinary content to students as effectively as possible (*‘teacher-focused teaching’*), to teachers who focus on how to effectively support students’ ability to master the discipline at hand (*‘student-focused or learning-focused teaching’*) (Barr and Tagg 1995; Ramsden 2005).

These accounts, and their links to the quality of student learning, are not without challenges (Malcolm and Zukas 2001; Lindsay 2004). But, for the purpose of this article, it is enough to acknowledge that a variation exists in how academic teachers understand teaching and learning, and that this understanding is in some way linked to how they plan, perform, and interpret their professional practice, which is to support student learning. The focus of this article is to discuss what influences a teacher to move from one understanding to another. In doing so we use a socio-cultural perspective, focusing in particular on the conversations teachers have with colleagues. The assumption is that during some of these conversations teachers allow themselves to be

*Corresponding author. Email: katarina.martensson@ced.lu.se

influenced to such an extent that they develop, or even sometimes drastically change, their personal understanding of teaching and learning.

That a person's individual interpretation of a situation influences his or her actions means that individuals are knowledgeable in their relationship to the world. Humans live their lives 'as reflexive beings cognitively appropriating time rather than merely "living" it' (Giddens 2004, 237). This implies an active and deliberate way of living that should be true also for university teachers. They construct their understanding of teaching, and they teach in ways they believe in. This does not mean that they are all excellent teachers, but it means that most of the time they believe in what they do, or at least they try to make the best of it. On the other hand, teaching does not happen in a vacuum; it takes place in the context of, among other things, a discipline and a departmental (or other organisational entity) culture. Trowler and Cooper (2002) and Trowler (2005) explore how teachers are influenced by disciplinary traditions and other cultural structures constructed over time, i.e. 'teaching and learning regimes' (Trowler and Cooper 2002). These traditions, or, in Trowler's terms, 'moments', include recurrent practices, tacit assumptions, conventions of appropriateness, subjectivities in interaction and power relations. This cultural influence has also been identified in a joint study in Finland and the UK, where it is documented as 'systematic variation in both student- and teacher-focused dimensions of approaches to teaching across disciplines and across teaching contexts ... In other words, teachers who experience different contexts may adopt different approaches to teaching in those different contexts' (Lindblom-Ylänne et al. 2006, 285, 294). Therefore, even if teachers are knowledgeable agents, they are also placed in a dialectical relation with the surrounding world.

This surrounding context can be material in nature – for instance, a physical environment – but it can also be social in nature, as in the interactions between individuals working together within a particular department. In this article we use a socio-cultural perspective to focus on the social context of university teachers. To pursue this line of inquiry we move even closer to the social life of university teachers, recognising that university teaching is individually constructed as well as socially influenced. On the one hand, the individual's thinking is highly important, and teaching is a skill dependent on the individual's capacity. On the other hand, the teaching role is also one where the social context governs some of the available scope for action. In the classic book, *Academic tribes and territories* (Becher and Trowler 2001), the authors, in order to understand academic life, consider both the discipline (the territory) and the social life of those inhabiting the discipline (the tribe). Our attempt with this article is to make a contribution to our understanding of the latter.

Learning about teaching

The perspective on teachers' learning used here stems from phenomenographic research. Learning is seen as a development of the individual's relation to the world (Marton and Booth 1997). The learner interacts with the world by focusing on a limited number of aspects. The individual uses these limited numbers of aspects in order to construct, or activate, a conception of the specific situation. A few aspects perceived by a teacher are enough to recognise a teaching situation. The teacher will base his or her decisions on this conception, rather than on all aspects available. Consequently, learning can be viewed as the activation of processes when further aspects are incorporated into a comprehensive conception, or where new aspects force an old conception to change.

Conceptions are not fixed formations (Marton and Booth 1997), nor do they determine any specific sort of practice. Conceptions interact with the context (Demastes, Good, and Peebles 1995), and therefore they do not necessarily result in excellent skills or teaching performances. But the focus on conceptions offers a useful perspective while trying to understand how teachers learn about teaching, and, as mentioned before, there are empirical studies which claim that teachers' conceptions about teaching and learning relate to the quality of student learning (Kember 1997; Prosser and Trigwell 1999; Ho, Watkins, and Kelly 2001).

Since conceptual development and change results in a different perception of the world, it also affects the perception of the individual's own identity (Marton, Dall'Alba, and Beaty 1993), and his or her perception of others in the social context. In short, this means that if a university teacher learns something of importance about teaching and learning, he or she, via an incorporation of new aspects into his or her previous knowledge, develops his or her view not only on teaching in general but also on his or her role as a teacher. For a fuller account of this process see Entwistle and Walker (2000).

We will explore the social interactions between academic teachers which, from a socio-cultural perspective, influence their understanding of teaching and learning. In doing so, we have to understand more about academic communication.

Academic communication

Many writers, including ourselves, have described university teaching as a solitary business (Ramsden 1998; Handal 1999; Roxå and Mårtensson 2004; Gizir and Simsek 2005). Becher and Trowler (2001) describe the seemingly contradictory nature of communication in academia. Communication is the driving force for development, often in the form of peer-review. Simultaneously, academics seem strangely reluctant to engage in discussion and debate: 'The inclination to play safe – to minimize the risk of making professional enemies by opposing or being critical of colleagues' views – is also reflected in the preference, noted earlier, of many academics to steer clear of direct competition with others' (127).

But there are more nuances to academic communication. Becher and Trowler (2001, 92) also describe how academic researchers tend to rely on two networks: one is large, containing sometimes several hundreds of individuals, used for referencing and orientation. Here researchers decide what to do and how to position themselves and their research. The other network, as small as up to 10 individuals, is used for the testing of ideas and feedback on draft papers, involving more personal matters than orientation and referencing. Here researchers develop and nurture new ideas and new thoughts until these are mature enough to be presented to the larger network.

Following from that, it seems interesting to explore what social processes are significant for the way teachers construct and maintain an understanding about teaching and learning. We have, therefore, investigated the conversational partners that university teachers have, and the nature of these conversations. The intention is to identify smaller networks in relation to teaching within a larger social context. If such networks exist, teachers should be able to report on how they differentiate between colleagues while talking about teaching. We hypothesise that teachers are able to name rather few colleagues with whom they have sincere discussions about teaching, and that they express themselves differently while talking to colleagues not included among those few. If this is the case, it would be reasonable to assume that conversations in small

networks have greater implications for how teachers construct, maintain and develop an understanding of teaching and learning, than would be the case for conversations going on in large networks.

The investigation

This investigation started off from informal discussions with teachers and colleagues, and from buzz-group exercises during presentations at conferences. These discussions were concerned with whom academics talk to seriously about teaching. The anecdotal accounts we gathered from these discussions supported our hypothesis – university teachers have a few people with whom they have sincere conversations about teaching and learning (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Encouraged by this primary confirmation of our hypothesis, we started collecting evidence in a more systematic way. On five occasions data was collected concerning the number of conversational partners, where these were found, and the character of the conversations. Later we also included a question concerning the local culture in which these conversations took place.

A questionnaire was distributed to, in total, 109 academic teachers, of whom 106 answered the questions. The questionnaire was distributed on different occasions: during a national teaching and learning conference (40 answers) and at the beginning of pedagogical courses (66). The pedagogical courses were either mandatory (49 respondents) or voluntary (17 respondents). The data collected at the national conference was not categorised with regard to discipline. The data collected from the pedagogical courses was from engineering studies (17), the social sciences (17) and the humanities (32). The questions were presented in a questionnaire where the respondents indicated graphically how many conversational partners they had, as well as the location of them.

As part of the instructions for answering the questionnaire, we introduced the respondents to the concept of *critical friends* (Handal 1999), as a way to focus the respondents on individuals with whom they had sincere and serious discussions about teaching and learning.

The questions posed to all 109 respondents were:

- With how many people do you have engaging conversations about teaching and learning?
- Where are these conversational partners found?
- What characterises your conversations? (Please describe them.)

In our later data collection we added the following question:

- Do you consider your local professional culture to be supportive or non-supportive of such conversations about teaching and learning?

Results

With how many people do you have engaging conversations about teaching and learning?

In total 106 teachers answered the question, clearly showing that everybody could relate to our instructions. As clearly, they indicated that they had a limited number of conversational partners with whom they had serious discussions about teaching. Some 83% of the respondents had up to 10 conversational partners (Figure 1). The result mirrors

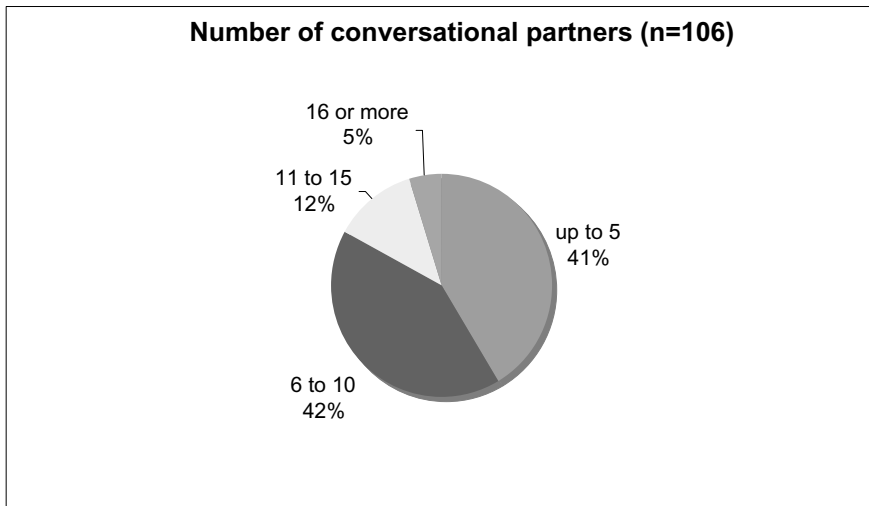


Figure 1. The number of people with whom university teachers have sincere discussions about teaching and learning.

what Becher and Trowler (2001) describe in relation to communication patterns among researchers.

There are differences between disciplines within the sample, even though the number of respondents is relatively small. Engineering studies reported an average of 5.4 conversational partners, the social sciences 8.4, and the humanities 8.2.

That teachers in engineering report fewer partners than in social sciences and the humanities again mirrors Becher and Trowler's (2001) accounts of research. These accounts are explained as a result of the level of competition, which they claim is higher in the hard sciences than in the soft sciences such as the humanities. It may be that this is true also for teaching. Even though we see in our data that teachers in engineering have fewer conversational partners, there is no clear evidence supporting Becher and Trowler's explanation in our sample. This issue would require further inquiry.

Where are these conversational partners found?

In our initial data collection, at the national teaching and learning conference, the 40 academics stated that their conversational partners could be found anywhere: within their discipline, in other universities or outside academia. In our later data collection, the teachers were asked to specify the number of conversational partners found within their own discipline, within their department, within their institution or elsewhere. This might have implications for the type of discussions occurring. If the discussions are between colleagues from the same discipline, disciplinary considerations can be made, while if the partners do not share discipline or even institution the conversational content is probably affected. The results are shown in Table 1.

It is noteworthy that university teachers discuss teaching with colleagues within their own discipline. In our sample, only three teachers indicated that they did not

Table 1. How many people university teachers have sincere discussions about teaching and learning with by discipline.

	Where are the conversational partners found? (average number of partners)				<i>n</i>
	Within discipline	Department	Institution	Elsewhere	
Engineering	1.9	2	0.6	0.8	17
Social sciences	2.5	2.7	1.2	1.3	17
Humanities	3.6	1.5	1.2	2	32

have a single disciplinary colleague to discuss teaching with. A further question concerns the teachers' use of the same partners for discussions about both teaching and research. This is a question we have not explicitly asked, and an issue that also needs further inquiry.

What characterises your conversations?

We asked the teachers to visualise their conversations and write accounts about them, either as stories about particular conversations or as more general comments about them. The accounts revealed a multitude of types of situations and topics. Some commonalities will be elaborated and illustrated.

Private conversations

Over and over again the accounts emphasised the private nature of these conversations. They almost always occur in a sheltered place, and almost never in formal meetings. In their accounts, teachers emphasised that these conversations are not overheard by anyone uninvited. These accounts are translated from Swedish:

We were sitting in X's office behind a closed door. It was not locked, but we knew that no one would dare to open it ... We were upset because our colleague A did not think it was necessary for the students [in engineering] to calculate nutrition. (Engineering studies)

I had one such conversation today, with A in the car, on the highway. About the criteria for assessment formulated by this other department and a text produced by the students. Basically it was about how our department seems to be moving in another direction. Suddenly there was a traffic jam and the conversation shifted. (Humanities)

These conversations are never planned but occur spontaneously with different intervals in the small group (3 individuals), who often have lunch together ... There it is possible to discuss ideas, thoughts and opinions that are not directly *comme-il-faut*. (Engineering studies)

Trustful conversations

The next common theme is the degree of trust that the teachers have in these conversations and in their conversational partners. The conversations sometimes contradict the official agenda, and they are also very personal. The quotes below illustrate that the conversations are permeated by trust:

An important foundation is respect, that we have full respect for each other as persons and for each other's opinions. (Humanities)

The foundations of conversations are often problems, obstacles and challenges rising from the teaching practice; that is, 'real' difficulties. Reaching out for external support to help with 'your' teaching problems, seeking suggestions for possible solutions. (Humanities)

Student evaluations in our department show that some teachers intimidate some students. Have discussed this with my closest colleagues in order to understand what is going on. It has led me into reflections about my own behaviour towards students. (Engineering studies)

Intellectually intriguing conversations

These conversations are not just small talk or a way to give and receive emotional support. They deal with important disciplinary content, and challenges about how to support students' understanding:

The conversation took place on the bus, on the way back from work. It is often about concepts or procedures and how to explain these. Mostly these things start with a story about something that occurred during today's lecture or seminar. (Engineering studies)

We talk after my teaching. We meet, or bump into each other by the copying machine. Someone wants to tell something, or complain, or compare – What do you think? Do you have any ideas about how to explain ... Have you experienced the same? How did you solve it? (Humanities)

She came to my department, and she talked about certain things in ways that helped me to understand things I had been working on for a long time. But never really understood. I started to use her illustrations in my teaching, modified them gradually. These conversations happen at random. They can start with research and end with teaching, or vice versa. (Engineering studies)

One teacher from the humanities summarises all these themes in one single account:

The conversations with my significant others concerning pedagogical questions/teaching and learning are characterised by the fact that they are informal, originate in different situations and different contexts where the topic of discussion initially might have been another, and, consequently, they are spontaneous. The conversations can nevertheless be quite long (sometimes), around 25–30 minutes. An important foundation is respect, that we have full respect for each other as persons and for each other's opinions. Another important condition is reciprocity, i.e. a mutual exchange of ideas and experiences. These conversations have quite a different nature from the formal meetings with other teachers that are arranged by people responsible for study programmes. These formal meetings/conversations have more a character of diplomatic conferences, where each word is carefully chosen, the truth is not always at the forefront (truth is another characteristic of the conversations with the significant others that I just forgot) and one must bite one's lip (sometimes).

Significant conversations in relation to the perceived local context

This question – do you consider your local professional culture to be supportive or non-supportive of such conversations about teaching and learning? – was posed later in our investigations to 50 of our respondents, as we gradually became interested in

Table 2. Respondents' perception of cultural support, and their reported number of conversational partners, in total and within their own discipline.

Culture perceived as supportive or non-supportive to discussions about teaching and learning.	Supportive	Non-supportive
Number of respondents indicating supportive or non-supportive culture	31	16
Total number of conversational partners	231	56
Number of conversational partners per respondent (mean)	7.4	3.5
Number of conversational partners within discipline	121	33
Number of conversational partners within discipline, per respondent (mean)	3.9	2.1

possible relations between the conversational partners and the local culture as perceived by the teacher. The teachers were asked to indicate their perception of the local culture by marking a cross on a line representing a continuum ranging from 'supportive' to 'non-supportive'. We received 47 answers.

There seems to be a clear link between how encouraging the culture is experienced as and how many conversational partners the respondents have (see Table 2). If the culture is experienced as supportive of such conversations, the teachers report twice as many conversational partners than if the culture is experienced as non-supportive. This is the case for the total number of partners as well as for the number of partners within the same discipline.

Discussion

This inquiry focuses on how university teachers create and maintain their understanding of teaching and learning. The perspective is mainly socio-cultural. So far our findings clearly indicate that teachers have sincere conversations about teaching with a few specific colleagues. The data also indicates that some features of these conversations are critical: they are permeated by trust, they have an intellectual component of problem solving or idea testing, and they are private and involve only a few distinct individuals. In relation to conversations in the larger social context, there are indications in our data that those conversations are less sincere and less personal.

There are, of course, a number of themes worth exploring in relation to the issues addressed in this article. However, in our material three themes emerged as characteristics of the conversations – trust, privacy and intellectual intrigue.

Trust

It is important to emphasise the component of mutual trust in the accounts of conversations that we have collected. The people who have these discussions are sometimes close colleagues with a long history together, and often with similar interests and values. They regularly return to their trust for the other person's judgement and state that they can often foresee the other person's reaction. The range of topics also indicates that the conversations deal with intellectual as well as emotional material, with ideas and problems, and with issues that sometimes are in contradiction with the official agenda.

Deci et al. (2006) have investigated the effects of receiving, and giving, what they call 'autonomy support' in friendship relations: 'Autonomy support is defined in terms of one relational partner acknowledging the other's perspective, providing choice, encouraging self-initiation, and being responsive to the other' (313). They show that, in such a constellation, both parties experience increased well-being and overall satisfaction. They also show that such a relationship, over time, leads to a capacity to view things through the other person's perspective.

It is likely that these conversations open up the possibility of constructing and maintaining – and perhaps partly changing – an understanding about the realities of teaching. They offer the possibility for autonomy support, and they also create a situation where it is possible to see the world through the other person's perspective, at least to a certain degree where aspects of reality hidden to one individual become accessible by a mutual exchange of perspectives. We claim that such relations qualify as what Berger and Luckmann (1966) call a relation with a *significant other*. Significant others, they state, 'occupy a central position in the economy of reality-maintenance. They are particularly important for the ongoing confirmation of that crucial element of reality we call identity' (170). Following from this, these conversations are likely to influence teachers' conceptions of teaching.

We use the term *significant conversations* for the discussions university teachers have provided us with accounts of. The significant conversations arguably hold an exclusive position in the socio-cultural context, where university teachers continuously construct, maintain and develop an understanding about teaching and learning. These significant conversations also, we assume, have implications for the individual's identity. The individual may expand his or her identity into something which offers new possibilities, both in his or her teaching practice but, possibly, also in more official disciplinary and departmental discourse. Yet another implication is that, considering the personal nature of the significant conversations and their sometimes very long history, the resulting understanding of reality may, in some cases, take forms that official discourse may find both strange and alien.

Privacy

These significant conversations take place in private, meaning that the individuals involved are well aware of whom they want to talk with, and that the conversations take place where they cannot be overheard. The privacy and the teachers' descriptions of the conversations relate to what Goffman (2000) calls *backstage* behaviour. Backstage behaviour refers to situations where we are private, or at least feel that we know who is watching, and we behave in a more unrestricted way than when we are 'front stage'. When we are observed by others, especially when we are not sure about their interpretation of our actions, we behave more according to what we consider to be the appropriate code.

However, even though these significant conversations take place backstage, they are not isolated from the surrounding culture. The participants carry with them discursive material from the outside, they react and relate to things going on outside, they are presumably aware of a whole range of things while having the conversations, but it is the atmosphere of privacy and trust that allows them to open up in a way that makes learning possible. Overall, these significant conversations that take place backstage are all part of a greater culture that flows through them. They are dependent on that culture, but they are also free to interpret its elements, and they do. This interplay

between different levels of culture is examined in more depth by Alvesson (2002), Trowler and Cooper (2002) and Giddens (2004).

Intellectual intrigue

Many of the accounts in our data reveal conversations where the individuals try to make sense of experiences, where they deal with problems, and plan and evaluate actions. In many ways, what they do is to use their agency in the way explored theoretically by Giddens (2004). They use whatever knowledge they have to interpret experiences, and they use these interpretations while planning and conducting teaching.

But, similar to what Giddens points out, the teachers only have a limited view of the situation. There are numerous unintended consequences of what they decide to do. There are also an endless number of aspects they fail to recognise during interpretations. But it is still a way to understand a practice that they are engaged in. While doing so they use significant conversations with a few other colleagues for support.

Although the overall purpose of these significant conversations is to interpret teaching and learning realities, an external observer might be critically concerned with the quality of the reflections discernible in the accounts. According to the scholarship of teaching and learning literature (Boyer 1990; Hutchings and Shulman 1999; Trigwell et al. 2000; Kreber 2002), inquiry into teaching and learning for developmental purposes should make use of pedagogic literature and theory in order to deepen the individual's understanding, and the result of the inquiry should be made public for others to learn from and/or to criticise. Even though traces of this can be discerned in the accounts, they are not common or well developed. Rather, what can be seen are 'personal theories'. This should not be used as a reason to criticise the teachers. Instead it has to be recognised that teachers act in a cultural and historical context, where demands on scholarly approaches to teaching and learning vary considerably.

Conclusion

The data presented here suggest that university teachers rely on a limited number of individuals to test ideas or solve problems related to teaching and learning. We conclude that teachers relate to a small network in the same way that researchers do, as described by Becher and Trowler (2001).

Because of the character of the conversations in these small networks, we call them *significant networks*. There are no signs of boundaries surrounding them, neither organisational nor physical. The networks rather appear as a number of exclusive relations where every individual has his or her significant relations, as illustrated in Figure 2. Each star indicates a teacher. The stars 1, 2 and 3 are individual teachers. Teachers 1 and 2 have significant conversations with each other, while 3 has them with 2 only as mediated by conversations through an additional teacher. The thick arrows bind together significant conversational partners, and the thin arrows indicate other individuals, less significant. The square indicates a department or working unit. Together, all of the arrows illustrate the web of relations that can be found inside and outside a department. Consequently, it is apparent, and supported by our data, that the significant networks do not acknowledge organisational boundaries such as departments.

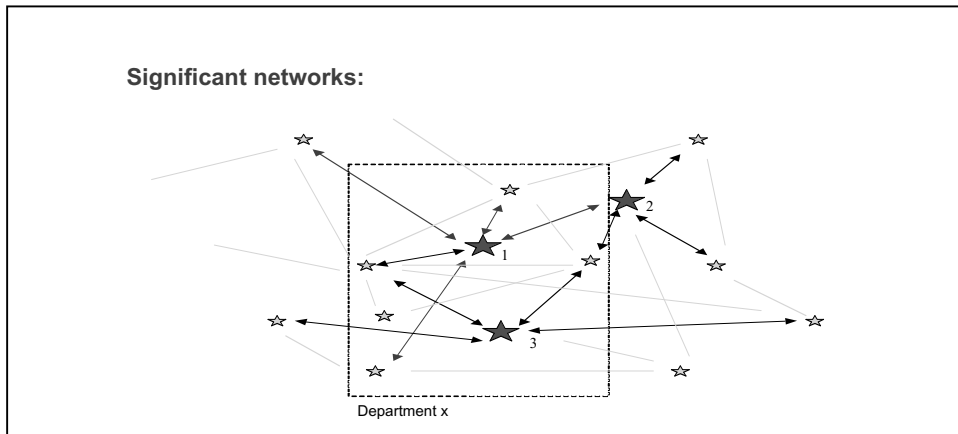


Figure 2. An illustration of a significant network for three teachers.

The existence of significant networks has implications for leadership and management as well as for academic development. By recognising significant networks it becomes possible to further understand why policies, organisational strategies or bureaucratic requirements have such a limited impact on university teaching (Trowler 1998; Bauer et al. 1999; Newton 2003; Hedin 2004; Stensaker 2006). The messages displayed in policies are interpreted and evaluated during many significant conversations, more or less independently of each other. The outcome of these conversations will determine the impact of each policy. If the outcome is unfavourable a policy would most likely fail in its attempt to influence practice. The significant networks and conversations are arguably quite resilient to external pressure, though the validity of this claim remains to be tested, since we have not asked specifically for accounts in relation to policies.

Another topic for further inquiry is the relation between significant networks and the wider social culture, departmental and institutional, appropriately exemplified by the concept of teaching and learning regimes (Trowler and Cooper 2002; Trowler 2005). We have attempted to explore that relation elsewhere (Roxå and Mårtensson 2009).

A third area for further inquiry is to deepen our understanding of significant networks more generally. Since they, in many ways, appear to be gatekeepers for development and change, it would be interesting to firstly investigate the quality of the conversations in relation to academic standards. Secondly, one might investigate how conversations about teaching and learning could be influenced, for instance in order to fuse a culture permeated by scholarly attempts to improve teaching.

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