

Teacher Talks Episode 1: Dr Lyn Sharratt on Learning Walks and Talks

Rebecca Vukovic

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Welcome to the first ever Teacher Talks, a podcast event hosted by Teacher magazine, and proudly brought to you by our podcast supporter, the Melbourne Graduate School of Education.

My name is Rebecca Vukovic, I'm Deputy Editor of Teacher magazine, and it is my pleasure to share with you the very special interview we recorded in Melbourne in front of a live audience of teachers and school leaders.

Our guest, Dr Lyn Sharratt, is a highly accomplished practitioner, researcher, author and presenter. She holds a doctorate from the University of Toronto, and coordinates the doctoral internship program in the Leadership, Higher and Adult Education Department at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

In this episode, I sit down with Lyn to discuss one specific leadership approach, Learning Walks and Talks. We have a lot to cover in this episode, from building a culture of trust amongst staff for Learning Walks and Talks, to the nuts and bolts of how to do a Learning Walk and Talk effectively and confidently. What's also really exciting about this episode is you'll be hearing from several audience members who had the opportunity to ask Lyn their questions about Learning Walks and Talks, in a way that was specific to their school contexts. Let's dive in.

Rebecca Vukovic: Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Dr Lyn Sharratt.

Lyn Sharratt: Thank you.

RV: Lyn, thanks for joining us tonight. So let's start off by covering off some of the basics. What are some of the underlying principles of Learning Walks and Talks?

LS: Well thanks Rebecca, thanks for having me. It's pretty exciting to be a first. I just want to talk about the overarching research we've done, I've done with Michael Fullan, on the 14 Parameters of system and school improvement. So 14 areas that we look at that we know when integrated and worked in concert that they make a difference to increasing students' achievement. And within those 14 Parameters, there's always the question that we're asking as leaders – how do we know that all of our students are learning?

So Learning Walks and Talks are a tool to support leaders and teacher leaders to answer that question. They also empower and enhance learning for us as instructional leaders. They offer opportunities to provide appropriate support for students and teachers, they give us data to plan our next steps in professional learning. And when I think about that, data that we ensure informs our next steps for learning come from the walks and talks we do in our schools. As well, Learning Walks and Talks develop those opportunities to have conversations, authentic conversations with our teachers. And finally, that data we're collecting really gives us information about the trends and patterns across our school and also across schools when we walk together with others.

RV: And I want to ask about the protocols next. What are the protocols for Learning Walks and Talks?

LS: It's really important that the first protocol is that Learning Walks and Talks are not judgemental. They're not evaluative. We have a pathway for that in Ontario called Teacher Performance Appraisal. That is not what Learning Walks and Talks are about. So when we are in classrooms, and I say five to seven minutes because all of us can find five to seven minutes over time during a week. We don't take pencils in, we don't take notes in, we're not sitting in the back of the room writing observation notes. So it's a time for us to walk into classrooms, read the walls, look at what students are doing, what the teachers are doing, and it's a time for us to collect that data on evidence of our professional learning that we've been providing our teachers.

As well, it's really important in this protocol that we don't interrupt the instruction. So there's no greeting to the teacher, if we're walking with someone else, we don't talk to each other. It's a time for us to really observe what we're seeing in the classroom and if we get a chance, after we are in the classroom and there isn't direct teaching, we may kneel down and ask a student five questions. So after many walks in classrooms, the last protocol is, is there an authentic question we want to ask the teacher that we want to know more about as a leader?

RV: And you've said, and I'm going to quote you to yourself here, 'leaders need to clearly articulate a shared vision, changes in teacher beliefs and motivation only come after changes in practice'. So how to leaders ensure they have all staff on board before starting on this journey?

LS: Well I think all of our work starts with relationship building and trust. And I think we really have to show teachers that when we're in classrooms, focused on one thing that we've been working on in our collaborative enquiries, or our professional learning sessions within PLCs [Professional Learning Communities], that we really aren't evaluating. We're looking at practices in classrooms to understand them and become even better instructional leaders. And I think that's the work over time to build that trust. And so, teachers at first I think may be sceptical until they really see that we're sincere in learning about best practice and rolling up our sleeves and supporting our teachers, working alongside them.

RV: Let's talk now about the process because all Learning Walks and Talks begin at the data wall in order to establish that emotional connection to each student. So what kinds of questions are leaders asking themselves during this part of the process?

LS: So I've written quite a bit in my new book *Clarity* about data walls as *prevention* so that we know all of our students and the case management meetings that follow as *intervention*. So when I come to a data wall and I look at it, I want to know who the students are that are struggling, who the students are who are stuck and not moving forward, and then what's happening for the students who are really extending their thinking and perhaps not being extended enough? So data walls are not just about struggling students.

Questions that I ask when I'm at the data wall, 'how was it constructed?' 'Who constructed it?' 'Was it co-constructed with the teachers?' 'Was there a data set that all teachers thought they could use to begin the construction of the data wall?' And then I might ask teachers and principals standing beside me at the data wall, 'what are you most proud of in the co-construction of your wall?' 'Where might I go to see where this student is who is perhaps stuck?' And 'where might I go to look for this face of this student who is flying high and I can ask the student those five questions?'

Many things come to mind at the data wall but I'm always aware that the data wall is about instruction. So here's the assessment of where our students are, and what we want to know is what are the instructional starting points for this student, to go from the level they're on to actually the next level and way beyond? So conversations are always about assessment that informs instruction.

RV: And Lyn I've read that Learning Walks and Talks are most effective when they occur daily, but briefly. And I was wondering, because schools are such busy places, how likely is it that this could actually happen?

LS: Well, for me, our Learning Walks and Talks need to be integrated into what we're already doing in the school. So I might, as a leader, be going into the school, into the classroom to do an errand and on the way to do that errand, I might stop to do a very purposeful, focused, five minute walk and talk. So that's really the way I could do it every day. Another way is to actually put it in my daily planner, my schedule for the week and walk beside a colleague. So it's in the planner, it's scheduled, and we're going to go on a walk together for five or seven minutes. And then have a conversation afterwards. So there's many ways to do walks. One is while we're already out in the school. The other is absolutely scheduled. So we're very focused that we're going to keep that five to seven minutes sacred.

RV: And it's important too to mix up the time of day that they take place, isn't it?

LS: Absolutely. We want to see right across the school day how our students are learning, what our students are doing in their performance tasks. What strategies are teachers using to ensure there's critical thinking in the task that students are doing? So we want to see that happening in Science, in Maths, in English, right throughout the day for sure.

RV: So Lyn, let's talk now about the actual walk itself. So let's just pretend for a moment that

you're a school leader conducting a Learning Walk and Talk. I'd like to get really specific here. What are you looking out for? What are you observing? And what are you thinking about?

LS: So we'd start our walk at the data wall and we might look at a face that we're concerned about and walk to find that particular face. And ask the five questions of that student, and then think about that face on the wall was of concern for the teachers as they co-constructed the data wall so how can I as a leader support the teacher in teaching this student and how can I support that student? So there's always that thinking about how the students are doing, what performance tasks they're doing, and how can I support the teacher with resources they might need for just in time work with the student. So that's certainly one thing I think about, starting out at the wall, taking a face figuratively off the wall, and going to find out how that face is being supported and how that teacher is being supported. So for me, the first thing is at the data wall so we're looking at that.

The second thing in the classroom is to also look at the learning environment in the classroom. So I've found the student, I've asked the student some questions, but I might before I leave look at the learning environment and see if there are pieces of student work for example on the walls, there is evidence of student voice in the classroom and there's real evidence of students' co-constructing that learning environment with the teachers. So there's evidence of student work everywhere.

RV: And Lyn you mentioned the five questions that you ask students. What are those five questions?

LS: So I start by asking, 'what are you learning?' And it's really important it's actually the word 'learning' not 'doing'. So not what are you doing? But what are you learning? And why are you learning that? So for me, it's pretty clear that if the student can answer that question, that teachers have been very specific and detailed in deconstructing the learning intentions from the curriculum expectations. The second question is 'how are you doing in that learning?' At least that's what we say at home, but I know you say here, 'how are you going in that learning?' And I want to listen for evidence of students understanding how to be successful. And they might say, 'I can', and it will be an 'I can' statement that will be in the room. So I might ask a student to come in and show me where are those success criteria so you know how well you're doing? And then the next question is, 'how do you know how you're doing in that learning?' So there's a direct relation between that question and the descriptive feedback the students have been given – given to each other, always based on the success criteria. The next question is 'how do you improve?' And we want students to be able to articulate what they need to do next, if they've got visible co-constructed success criteria in the classroom, they're able to reference, here is where I am and here is where I'm going to go next.

And finally, the last question I ask is 'where do you go for help if you're stuck?' And for me, it's all about students understanding how to be resilient learners, where to go to find what they're needing support in. So for example, they might say, 'well I go to Billy, he's really expert in this math work we're doing'. Or they might say, 'I go to a friend'. They might say, 'I check things out with my mum and dad' – I heard that today. Or they might say, 'the teacher, I ask the teacher'. But what's important to me is they have strategies beyond the teacher. So we all want students, of course, to need their teachers, we also want students to be able to be really resilient about where they go and whether it's something online to support them or whether it's their peers in the classroom.

RV: And Lyn, if students are able to answer these question confidently, what do you feel that reveals about the teaching that's taking place?

LS: I'm glad you asked that because I tried to make the link just now between these questions that we've researched and developed, and clarity in assessment that informs instruction. So for me, assessment literacy is about teachers planning together using the curriculum expectations, what the learning intention is for a unit and then unpacking and deconstructing the vocabulary in that learning intention with the students and then displaying it in the classroom. So there's an anchor chart that students can always refer to about what they're learning. And the next question relates to co-constructing success criteria. So these questions align with that strong, research based and evidence proven work around assessment that drives instruction. So it's about learning intentions and success criteria, from the curriculum expectations. It's about descriptive feedback that students receive directly based on the success criteria.

It's about peer and self-assessment that also is given to each other and students in the classroom and students evaluating their own work, also against the success criteria. And finally, these questions relate directly to students being able to set their own goals for learning, knowing how to improve but it's always based on the success criteria. So just in thinking about assessment literacy, I really want to highlight how important it is that we start with the curriculum, we have a strong learning intention that begins with 'we are learning to',

and then we have co-constructed success criteria with the students that start, 'I can' – so the 'I can' statements. And that teachers together have co-planned the learning intentions and success criteria first, but they think about in that planning, how they ensure students understand the intentions and are living in that co-constructed success criteria.

RV: And Lyn when you say, 'walk the walls' what does that mean exactly?

LS: So when I go into classrooms with my colleagues, I first take a moment and look around the classroom space and think about that learning environment as the third teacher and I talk often about that. So the first teacher is of course the parent, the second teacher is the teacher in the classroom, but the third teacher is that learning space and how is that learning space designed to support the students in the classroom? And is it really a space that students own as well as the teacher?

So I walk the walls, I think about what's on the walls in terms of student thinking, of student voice. And I think about the classroom space as not being Pinterest perfect. I like tidy at home, but I really think that the spaces that our students learn in must be co-constructed with what's important for the students and the teacher. So I do walk the walls, I look at what students are thinking about and I look at the performance tasks to see if they're higher order, before I then go to find the face that I can ask those questions to. And then leave thinking about and looking for evidence of that assessment literacy, so I look at those anchor charts, are the supports there in the classroom that have been co-constructed with students and are really helpful to them in identifying their next steps for learning and their learning goals?

Coming up: Dr Lyn Sharratt delves into how to go about facilitating discussions outside of the classroom and we also hear questions from the audience. But first, here's a message from our sponsor.

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RV: And Lyn, let's talk about the conversations that take place afterwards because from what I can understand, it involves the walker or walking team moving outside of the classroom and discussing the observable practices. When done well, what does this look like?

LS: So we're looking into classrooms to really discern students' thinking, hearing students' voice, and looking for that evidence of assessment. And when we're not talking to each other and we're not writing notes, but what's very important that when we come out of the classroom as colleagues walking together or even by ourselves, that we know what we've seen. And it's important as well when we come outside to have those conversations that we move away from the teacher's line of sight because it isn't about evaluation. I never want to give teachers the impression that we were talking about them or making notes about them. So when we come outside of the classroom, I can't always remember what I see for long periods of time so I do make some notes away from that classroom door and windows, and then with the person or the people I'm walking with, I ask 'what did you notice? What did we see?' And so that's kind of the *retell*.

And then I ask, 'why is that important to us? Why is that meaningful?' So that's the *relate*. Relate that to the literature you know about or the experiences you've had. And then I usually ask a question, 'what lessons did we learn from that? What will we take away from that experience in the classroom?' So I always think of that structure, *Retell, Relate, Reflect*. And that's a structure I've used for a long time. I teach at the university now and I still ask my students to use that structure in the internship programs that we work on together. So it's a really important structure, I think for teaching students as well because it's not just about recount or retell. It's very simple. We always want to be able to make connections to relate to our experience to the literature we've been reading.

And also, *reflect*, reflect on is there something I want to ask this teacher about? Is there something I want to come back again and check out? Or is there something that my colleagues have said to me in this conversation that I didn't even notice in the classroom? So I might say to everyone – 'Did you see that? I didn't see that. Perhaps we need to go back in there again and have another look.'

So it's very powerful to work with and walk with one other person, if we can find that time, or a small group of colleagues. So today for example, I've been working with the Knox network here in Melbourne and we walked together in small groups and the conversations were really dynamic, powerful and deep because we had an

opportunity to hear what others saw and why it was meaningful for them and reflect on, is that something that's happening in my school? Or not happening that perhaps we could work towards?

RV: And Lyn, how many walks in a classroom would you say should take place before those professional discussions?

LS: I'm really reticent to put a number on the number of walks in a classroom. I just want to say that after one five to seven minute walk in a classroom, we can't possibly ask a teacher an authentic question that we want to know more about. So I think it's more about building that relationship and trust and the questions need to be very authentic about what we want to learn more about, to become and even better instructional leader. So it might be after one or two times in the classroom, it might be after 20 times in the classroom – it really does start with relationship building and trust. And also being an authentic leader. '...I'd really like to ask you a little bit about why you do ... whatever'. But it needs to be said in a very thoughtful and respectful way, and never judgemental. Did I say that already?

RV: And what are some sample reflective questions that you would ask those teachers?

LS: I'm always interested in how our teachers plan for instruction. What do they think about? So I often ask, 'what are some of the things that are important to you when you plan for instruction?' And I'm always also interested in how teachers think through differentiating the instruction for this small group of learners or this small group. Another thing I'm interested in asking is, 'how do you group for instruction? How do you ensure that your groups are flexible, and fluid, and what are the things that you think about?' Teachers think about so many things and I am just fascinated by the grouping or perhaps the arrangement of the classroom furniture. And as I go about walking in classrooms right across the globe I see some pretty interesting arrangements of student furniture and new furniture, ergonomic furniture and I think about, 'what do teachers think about when they co-construct that learning space?'

RV: And Lyn you've said that 'Learning Walks and Talks provide an opportunity for school leaders to understand high impact classroom practice and work towards achieving it in every classroom, reducing variation in practice in and across the school.' This is really interesting. So does it reduce variation in practice?

LS: So one of the things we know from the literature and actually, I worked alongside Ken Leithwood at our university, and he really talked a lot about the greatest variation in teaching practice is within a school, as opposed to across schools. So I always think about that and have conversations with Ken about that. How do we find first what are the high impact instructional strategies and then, how do we ensure that they're not in small pockets in a few classrooms but across all classrooms? And I find John Hattie's work very helpful in identifying those high impact practices with his effect sizes. So they really do align with my thinking about high impact practices and what I look for in classrooms are practices that ensure higher order thinking and are the tasks that students are given higher order?

So I think about rich tasks, robust tasks, I think about that strength in gradual release when I see teachers who are modelling, sharing, guiding and creating independent readers and writers and critical thinkers. I think about accountable talk as a high impact strategy in classrooms. So those are the things that I'm looking for and as a principal of a school, if I find a teacher who really is effective in using one of those high impact practices, then I ask that teacher if she or he would be willing to work with a small group of teachers who might not be there yet. So it's always important for me to walk and find strength in teachers who are using high impact practices and think about how they might share their knowledge, whether it's at a staff meeting or professional learning community gathering. Always thinking about ensuring that those high impact practices aren't in pockets but go across all the school, the whole school and also across many schools. So we're always thinking about where can we identify a teacher who is willing to share their craft knowledge?

RV: And Lyn you've also said that 'it's important to give teachers opportunities to become consciously skilled, and articulate about their expertise. We need to make sure teachers can articulate why something is working and why it may not be.' Do these conversations help to do this?

LS: Absolutely. And that really refers to our 14 Parameter research. The first parameter is shared beliefs and understandings and it is number one of those 14 for a reason, it is probably the hardest to do and the most important. And within that parameter number one, the last dimension of it is that we can all articulate why we do what we do every single day. If we can't articulate why we're doing it, then we need to stop it and really be able to say 'I'm using this practice because I have measured my impact and it's making a difference for my students'. So conversations with teachers can really focus on 'what's working for you? What are you doing that

makes an impact with your students?’

And sharing that craft knowledge and giving time for teachers to share that craft knowledge is very important so that we’re creating a quality teaching workforce who are very articulate about what’s working, what’s having an impact. It starts with those conversations about sharing craft knowledge with others.

RV: And to finish off, we’ve spoken a lot about the benefits for teachers and leaders, but what are the benefits of Learning Walks and Talks on students?

LS: Well it goes to that parameter number one as well. Can students articulate what they’re learning? Why are they learning it? And can they articulate how they’re doing? And how can they improve? And what will be their next steps? And where can they go for help if they’re stuck? So Learning Walks and Talks gives students an opportunity to articulate what they know about their own learning and I think through that articulation, they own their own learning and their own next steps for improvement.

RV: Fantastic, that’s all from me. We’re going to now take some questions from our audience. Our first question comes from Caithlin Power, a former primary school teacher from Melbourne. Caithlin has a question about creating a comfortable and trusting environment for Learning Walks and Talks.

Caithlin Power: Thanks Rebecca and thank you Dr Sharratt, it’s been really inspiring listening to you speak tonight. Every now and then I have fleeting moments of wishing I was back in the teaching sphere and tonight has definitely been full of those moments. So thank you. In my experience as a teacher and working on a leadership team, I’ve noticed, it’s quite common among teachers to feel quite anxious and ... lacking self-confidence when they’re advised that members of the leadership team or colleagues may be wandering through their classrooms and offering critiques on their teaching practice. I know you have ... spoken about that this evening but I’m wondering if you have say a specific story or an experience where you’ve been able to successfully create a comfortable and trusting environment for learning walks to take place where perhaps teachers were quite lacking in that self-confidence prior.

LS: Well I have to say that in Ontario where I work, we’ve been doing this for many years. And they’ve evolved actually which I find really interesting. We started with literacy walks and talks because our priority was literacy and then they evolved to instructional walks and talks because we wanted to focus in on instruction. In my later writing I’ve called them Learning Walks and Talks because they are about learning and they’re not about evaluation. So when I think of that evolution of my walking and talking with students and teachers, I think about how we have to create that atmosphere, or that environment I guess, that it’s about us as becoming even better instructional leaders. It’s not about evaluating and making teachers feel uncomfortable. And I think you can only get that level of comfort by doing it often and honestly without giving teachers feedback, especially critical feedback, ever.

But giving teachers feedback after five minutes in a classroom. I think the conversations with teachers have to happen after many times being in that teacher’s classroom and they’re honest conversations and often, the conversations are ‘I’ve been in your classroom today and I was wondering about how you’re grouping for instruction?’ And the teacher often says, ‘Hmm, I’ve never thought about that.’ So that’s really something I’m interested in because I know you group flexibly for instruction, I’ve seen you do that. And so often the conversation is quite flowing and easy and teachers actually really enjoy the conversations, they want to talk more about what we notice together and they might say ‘in my experience as an administrator, they say, well what do you think I should do differently?’ And then we work on it together. So to me, it’s all about all conversations being about co-construction, thinking through the opportunities together. And I just want to say to you as well, that I never talk about problems of practice. I think we have to be really careful with our language. I talk about ‘what might be the next best learning move we could make?’ So I think it’s about being careful with your questioning, with your conversations and being really true to what you really want to know about and having that dialogue.

RV: Fantastic. Our next question comes from Michelle Di Giovanni, a primary school teacher and learning specialist. She has a question on preparing staff for the Learning Walks and Talks.

Michelle Di Giovanni: Lyn, my question, as stated is around preparing staff for this new approach, so you see authenticity, the real every day teaching instead of that comment that you made about Pinterest perfect.

LS: Oh t