



The role of conversations in developing a learning community and influencing change

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ABSTRACT HEAD

This opinion piece is presented as a conversation between Diane Nutt, who began the EFYE (European First Year Experience) network, initiated the first EFYE conference and was the first conference chair, and William Carey who attended the first conference early in his career and is the current chair.

We discuss the journey we have undertaken in developing this successful conference series and highlighting the importance of first-year experiences and student transitions in Europe. Our focus here is not on the story of developing the conference itself, which we have discussed elsewhere, so much as on the importance of a variety of conversations in that journey – insightful conversations that shape the theme and direction of each conference; exploratory conversations that span boundaries of roles and countries; strategic conversations that lead to EU projects; relaxed conversations that happen over coffee or late into the night that develop friendships; developmental conversations that support professional and personal growth. In particular, we consider here, how conversations have enabled the conference series to sustain and grow, and to create change, both small – and large – scale. These conversations engage practitioners (teachers, professional learning colleagues, and support staff), researchers, policy makers, senior leaders, and students, from a range of countries. Dialogue, in both professional conversations and informal ‘chats’, has enabled us to engage and move forward with relatively limited resources. Connections we have made and the influence these conversations have had support professional ‘informal and incidental’ learning, impacting those at the heart of the conversation. Influence in this context is not about authority or status, but about connections and creating positive social spaces, and recognising the importance of involving all parties (students, professional staff, academics, researchers, managers) to fully engage people and institutions in change and to spread both vision and positive strategies focused on first year student success.

Here, in our own exchange, we suggest that a key learning from our journey is that friendly supportive conversations between ordinary practitioners can have influence and make an impact across a variety of settings in a tertiary world, in ways that are not always immediately apparent.

Keywords: conversations, dialogue, professional development, first year experiences, informal community

Introduction

This article is a conversation between the authors. We consider the importance of conversation for us in developing a conference learning community, and recognising how conference hosts and delegates of the last 20 years have used conversations to shape, develop, embed and disseminate First-Year Experience (FYE) agendas both strategically and operationally (Carey et al., 2024). Together we begin to explore why dialogue is so important to our conference’s success. The European First Year Experience (EFYE) Conference is 20 years old in 2026. For us, this conference represents ordinary people doing extraordinary things and getting

there via many conversations. Those conversations involve varied participants: academics, professional staff, managers, students. In a sense they represent the whole institution and that's part of what makes EFYE conversations so unusual. The nature of these developmental and evolutionary conversations at EFYE are echoed, albeit in more localised contexts, in other academic development spaces. Dorner and Belic (2021, p.221) describe this as "individual development ... immersed in a collective learning experience" and suggest that it can "pave the way towards institutional development or transformation". It is perhaps worth noting here that for us conversations span a variety of types of dialogic communication (Bohm, 1996), both professional conversations and more informal 'chats' (Chadha, 2021, p.321). We see the benefit of different types of conversation in the context of the EFYE conference series including enabling the collaborations noted by Matthews et al. (2018) that support a different way of doing and thinking about higher education with students through partnership. Similarly, by Felten et al. (2019), whose challenge to reconceive the role students play as objects or consumers, to "legitimate actors in and agents of academic development" (Felten et al., 2019, p. 195) aligns to the conversation culture of EFYE. A culture in which students are not just included in conversations but, in acknowledging a distributed expertise across all participants, are actively shaping the knowledge and action that emerges through the conversations (Carey, 2022).

Diane

As we approach the anniversary, I've been thinking about what factors have enabled us to continue the event successfully. First year experience (FYE) is important to higher education (HE) institutions, to the staff who work with students, and to student success but it is a less clearly defined field than, for example, assessment, or student support. Creating a successful FYE for all students involves a range of people and processes, and considerations of both individual experiences and overarching structures. Over the years of EFYE events we have found that we are not working with one group of staff but need to work with everyone, and that includes students. We haven't had significant resources behind us, so how do you think we have managed to engage these varied participants and bring them together to make change happen? And how do we keep people motivated and ensure the first-year experience is on European university agendas?

Will

You mentioned that FYE is less clearly defined than areas like assessment or student support – and I think that's true. But what's interesting is that the key stakeholder group is actually very clear: it's first-year students. The complexity comes from how many different roles intersect around that group and feel like they've got a direct link with FYs – I wonder if that's different to some other spaces?

I think one of the reasons we've managed to engage such a wide range of people is that we've created a space where everyone feels they can contribute. For people coming to the early conferences, perhaps it was a different experience to other events because of the variety of roles involved.

Conversation is at the heart of it all. Bohm's (1996) idea of dialogue as a non-competitive form of communication really resonates. EFYE has always made space for that kind of exchange. The informal moments – the coffee breaks, the pre-meets – those are where the incidental learning happens (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Spitzner and Meixner (2021, p. 300) also suggest, "we enlarge what is meant by the term 'conversation'" ... to include ideas gained from "hanging around" at events like conferences. People leave with insights they didn't expect, for example, do you remember the conference in Birmingham that had the

shared student-staff organising committee? I know that students (and early career staff) who ran that conference ended up developing careers in HE that they directly attribute to the conversations EFYE facilitated. (We have discussed some of the impact of the EFYE conference community, including some conversational elements, in Carey et al. 2024, see pp. 135-139).

Cultural immersion, being on campus, helps too. It's learning by being part of something. Killick (2012) talks about 'seeing-ourselves-in-the-world' as important for 'rich learning' and how building relationships with others outside of our own context is a vital part of global citizenship. His work focuses on students, but I think is relevant to the ways EFYE participants are connecting through the conference campus setting, and the social activities in the local communities that take place at events in the different host countries.

We also had (and have) fun! That matters, as Forbes (2021, p.64) says "Fun and play allows for genuine human connection that you don't get if you're serious all the time." Clughen (2025) too talks about the importance of positive emotions in learning situations. Given that the conferences have always been hosted on campuses, not in conference centres delegates experience what it's like to be a student again. Students have been central to the events – Wolverhampton and Manchester stand out for that. But they have participated in different ways, including organising elements at other conferences too, like Bergen, Copenhagen, and Abertay Dundee.

Something that interests me is how intentional you were in all of this; was it your value set explicitly coming through or something more implicit and organic? It's certainly a golden thread that became clearer over time (Carey et al. 2024)

Diane

One of the things I value about talking with you Will is how you always bring me back to the students. It's easy for me to get caught up in the staff needs and priorities as they are the majority of conference participants, and where most of my own work happens, but as you say – the real stakeholder group, the ones we most want to effect, are first year students. I think that highlights one of the aspects of the diversity of EFYE that works – the conversations we have are with people who have different perspectives on issues but have a shared concern for first years and in some cases *are* first years. Bohm (1996, p.2) suggests that we can recognize differences and 'make something in common' through conversation. We also gain insights we would otherwise overlook (Jarvis & Clark, 2020).

Interesting you ask about intentionality. We did actively include social elements in the first conference and continue to highlight this with hosts. I wanted people to feel comfortable at the event, and able to talk to others easily, which is why we established the preconference social evening and get people talking to each other from the opening keynote. It may seem playful to get delegates raising their hands in the opening session when their home country is called out, but it helps delegates see the diversity in the room, and we have always then encouraged delegates to have conversations with folk from other places as a key goal of their time at the event.

We also introduced the pre-conference first timer workshop with activities designed to get participants talking with others from different roles and countries AND exploring what the issues might be for others in different contexts. I like too that we end the conference with a call-to-action challenging participants to take ideas home to share with colleagues and students there. But creating the space and encouragement for conversations is only the beginning, what is it that makes those conversations impactful?

Will

You make me smile...there you go again, being gracious and building people up – something EFYE does, building connection for participants. Yes, I remind you about students, but not just because they're students, perhaps that they can be colleagues in FYE. I've seen first-hand the impact when students/staff collaborate to shape FYE – in institutions, and in EFYE conferences. (e.g. see Carey, 2022), and I'm in a new conversation with one of our EFYE Fellows who recently received the EFYE Leader Award about how learners are further integrated into conference development through dedicated conversation sessions at each conference; this will chime perfectly with the EFYE 2026 at University of Szeged, where the core organising team comprises students and staff, with a number of students engaging in conference organisation to support their academic learning.

I think EFYE exposes participants (students and staff) to new ways of working, perhaps reframing how they see their own role. It's something EFYE has always done well – helping people see their work through different lenses. There is some interesting work on postgrads and teaching conversations that I think is relevant here. Soomere and Karm (2021, p. 264) argue that mixing students and staff to talk about teaching both formally and informally outside of their home department context can create more of an "equal footing" and allow both "to discuss educational matters more openly". While Simon and Pleschová (2021) suggest that learning conversations seem to be more productive when they take place between postgraduate students and staff rather than student to student. EFYE provides a useful setting for conversations that cross hierarchical boundaries and which can explore ideas outside of home-based constraints. We have been involved in those conversations ourselves at conferences, speaking with students and senior managers in workshops and in social moments and seeing learning happen.

Those informal moments – chatting over coffee, sharing stories – can illuminate possibilities, and participants take that energy back home. EFYE gives me a buzz, fills me up again so I can go back and advocate for this work. Early on, I wonder if many of us felt like lone voices and then EFYE conversations helped us find community and belonging?

That sense of belonging – of finding your people – is something EFYE has always offered. It reminds me of what Ib Ravens was talking about at EFYE 2024...facilitating community in educational settings, creating social and psychological safety is just as important as academic structure. I think EFYE does that intuitively – people arrive and feel seen, connected, and re-energised. It happens through informal conversations, which I think connects to Jakob Feldt's communities of inquiry (EFYE 2024) – making meaning through dialogue; don't you think EFYE does that?

Diane

I don't think I see it as building people up as you suggest, but more about valuing what others bring to the table. For me, every interaction provides something I would probably not have come up with alone and acknowledging that enriches us all.

Your point about intentionality is a useful one I think, but balancing intentionality and the freedom to find 'backstage conversations' that can support positive developments and change is tricky. Pleschová et al. (2021, p.201) suggest that meaningful conversations about teaching occur in "liminal places like coffee shops" and "on the fringes of conferences and workshops". As we have noted we have tried to do this in the conference structure in some ways (social activities, good coffee on tap, identified social places,

pre-conference social, show and tell sessions), while still leaving things open for new ‘liminal’ or ‘fringe’ places to appear, often aligned with the university who hosts. I know we are revisiting the significance of the varied participants and these informal moments in this conversation, Will, but it is because it’s important to ‘make something in common’ by talking across roles and in open ways to develop the work we do in supporting all aspects of the first year student journey. Pleschová et al. are focused on developing teachers and teaching, but there is far more to FYE so we need more people involved in the dialogue.

The opening and final plenary frame the conference in conversational action. Bohm (1996, p.7) suggests dialogue is a “game with each other” and everyone gets something out of it; whereas discussion can be “a game against each other”. Not all conversations at the conference are dialogue based, there needs to be challenges in ideas and a push to question in sessions to some degree, but enough of the conference community is about creating dialogue for us to have been able to move forward together. The final plenary includes a call to continue the conversations after the conference, both with other delegates and with colleagues back at their home university. We committed early on to keeping it as affordable as possible as we wanted institutions to consider sending pairs or teams if feasible as we knew from experience how important support is when you return to home base and want to make changes.

I think all these conversations at and around the conference are making a difference and 20 years of a European conference, the establishment of national first year experience groups and organisations, and changes in institutions does suggest this has had some impact (Carey et al., 2024). I note that the Scottish first-year experience group is already running events to support regional institutions, and Belgian delegates have established a network in Belgium within the last year. But there is always more we could, and perhaps should, be doing, so what next, Will?

Will

On the cost, yes it was about more people attending to establish a shared responsibility, but also I remember your drive to make it accessible to early career staff to plant seed for a way of operating, to support a ripple effect. I think this is still important – of course we want senior colleagues who can drive change, but those who are practitioners are also affecting significant practice change and we support their thinking into the future.

One group we don’t talk about enough is researchers; perhaps working with researchers on FYE is something to build on in the future. We’ve made progress on evaluation; we have noted elsewhere that some useful cross national research collaborations have come out of EFYE (Carey et al., 2024, Onwards from Learning Analytics 2018) and last year at EFYE 2025, we introduced the EFYE Researcher category to the EFYE Awards programme with the support of colleagues at KU Leuven, but how do we continue to bring research and practice together? It’s important that we’re collecting evidence of impact so this conversation needs to be an ongoing one; and I think we’re enabling this, in part, with a revised website and database of previous EFYE conference sessions.

Whilst we’re having this conversation as the first chair and current chair, if we hold true to what we’ve said, then where next will likely be shaped as much, if not more, by future conference hosts – ensuring we remain current and future thinking in how the community responds to the changing FYE across Europe.

Biographies

Dr. Diane Nutt is a part-retired independent HE consultant working primarily in the UK. She has been a sociology lecturer, head of a retention team, an educational developer and an assistant director of learning and teaching. She set up the European First Year Experience Annual Conference Organising Committee and was chair from 2005 to 2022. She is on the International Advisory Board for the USA National Resource Center for First Year Experience and Students in Transition. She is also a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (PFHEA 2015)

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