

Educational consultation for reflective-dialogic partnerships: a possible model

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ABSTRACT • In the field of practice of educational development, instructional consultation is generally accepted as a valuable strategy to improve the quality of teaching. While instructional consultation has been enacted for several decades as a one-to-one strategy to improve individual academics' teaching, current evolutions in higher education challenge academics to engage in educational development as teams, reflecting on the pedagogical practices of their disciplines, within wider institutional and social contexts. In this paper, we first discuss the origins, meanings and impact of individual instructional consultation. Subsequently, we argue for a notion of educational consultation as reflective-dialogic partnership.

KEYWORDS •

Defining consultation

When searching the literature for a definition of consultation in higher education, one quite easily finds consensus regarding the focus of this strategy for educational development and the nature of the relationship between academics and educational developers it entails. However, with regard to the terminology used and, along with that, the people involved in consultation, some interesting nuances become apparent.

Typically, consultation focuses on the process of instruction, or as Hicks (1999a, p. 11-12) puts it “the immediate practicalities of everyday teaching: how to teach, possibly what to teach, but not the actual nature of what is being taught”. This kind of consultation is often qualified as ‘instructional’. Also, there exists general agreement, in the literature, about the nature of the interaction this type of consultation engenders. As Morrison (1997) points out, this is a voluntary process in which individuals seek assistance or advice from another party regarding their teaching. Those who seek assistance or advice initiate the process and negotiate the precise agenda of the instructional consultation process. Normally, this process includes several iterations and encourages reflection on current teaching practice and helps academics to consider alternative pedagogical ideas and methods, enact them and, subsequently, evaluate the results (Brinko & Menges, 1997). As importantly, the idea of instructional consultation implies a *modus operandi* based on elements like trust and listening and, as such, it contains an element of affectivity and not just rationality (Merry, 1999). These features are meant to take into account and diffuse, at least at the level of aspiration, issues of power differentials that emerge in communicative interactions, as Foucault teaches us (Foucault, 2008).

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In spite of the unanimity regarding the focus and nature of instructional consultation, the analysis of the literature reveals noticeable differences in the terminology used to qualify the consultative process (Hicks, 1999a). In the Canadian context, for example, the term ‘peer consultation’ is commonly used (Hicks, 1999a, p. 10), and the term indicates the practice of colleagues helping other colleagues in teaching enhancement endeavours. In this sense, Picinnin (1999, p. 71, *our emphasis*), states that instructional consultation essentially consists of “one person, *usually a fellow academic*, working with another faculty member to deal with instructional problems and improve performance”. From his Australian background, Boud (1999) describes instructional consultation in terms of the ‘peer learning’ that takes place, spontaneously and informally, among peers. He claims that these reciprocal relationships help academics to articulate their own understanding about teaching and increase the

opportunities to engage in reflection on practice. In the United States, the term 'instructional consultation' is more familiar, implying that an 'outsider' provides an analysis of an academic's teaching practice and formulates advice to improve this. Lenze (1996, p. 2, our emphasis) for instance, describes instructional consultation as "involving the provision of an outside, unbiased perspective (that of the *faculty developer*) on a faculty member's teaching." Weimer and Lenze (1997) also discuss the type of consultation as provided by a colleague or educational developer. Specifically, they discuss three different models of instructional consultation. In the collegial model, academics serve as peer consultants for one another. In the counselling as well as the professional services model, an educational developer enters the process as an outside 'expert'. As Weimer and Lenze argue, it is important for an educational developer to have both professional expertise and attention for the affective component of consultation. Hicks (1999a, p. 11) states "that a continuum exists from informal peer interaction at one extreme, through structured peer-to-peer consultation, to instructional developer guided consultation at the other extreme".

In the course of this paper, we will work with the meanings of 'instructional consultation'. This term – as opposed to peer consultation or peer learning – leaves room for educational developers to act as consultants. However, we prefer to re-name the process as educational consultation, as we argue that consultation encompasses, nowadays, more than giving advice to what happens in the classroom. In our view, consultation complexly focuses on curriculum development, within multifaceted institutional settings. Additionally, the notion 'educational consultation' has a less technical, top-down feel than the word 'instruction' implies. As educational developers, working at the central level of our universities to enhance the teaching and learning thinking and actions of our institutions, through support and advocacy (by which we mean putting teaching and learning on the institution's agenda) (Saroyan & Frenay, 2010), we frequently use this strategy in our work. We will start with a review of the literature on instructional consultation. We argue that consultation is a very common element of academic culture and at the same time a valuable strategy to understand and act upon the complexities of learning and teaching. We present educational group-to-group consultation as an alternative to the traditional one-to-one instructional consultation that acknowledges that learning and teaching depend on complex disciplinary, institutional and wider social contexts. The model we offer allows both educational developers and peers to act as consultants for one another, while integrating the counselling and professional expertise model. As such, our model focuses on real dialogue

among academics, educational developers and other managerial and administrative constituencies within an institution.

Consultation as an artefact of academic culture

Recent studies reveal that 'peer consultation' and 'peer learning' are an important part of academic life. In 2004, King conducted a survey of UK earth sciences academics in order to assess what they actually did, within the course of a calendar year, to enhance their teaching practice. The results suggest that academics engage in a large variety of activities, such as discussions with colleagues, responding to student feedback and peer reviews, as well as more formal activities such as attending workshops and conferences.

Interestingly, discussions with colleagues was flagged out as the favourite activity for development (indicated by 94 % of the respondents), whereas participation in a workshop gained markedly less support (indicated by 27 % of the respondents). These findings are corroborated by Knight, Tait and Yorke (2006). In their study (Knight *et al*, 2006, p. 322), both part-time and full-time academics confirmed they learnt "mainly by doing the job" and that there is a "strong element of learning through conversation with others, complemented by workshops and conferences". Other authors came to similar conclusions (e.g. Clement, Gilis, Buelens & Laga, 2008 ; Ferman, 2002 ; Rege Colet, 2007).

More recently, a survey of 106 academics (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009) has revealed that academics typically engage in significant conversations about teaching and learning with more or less ten colleagues, most often coming from the same discipline. These significant networks are characterized by privacy, trust and intellectual challenge, and exert influence on academics' teaching conceptions and practice.

Consultation as a strategy for educational development

Although it is acknowledged that one-to-one consultation among peers can be very powerful for the development of academics, both Hicks (1999b) and Boud (1999) articulate some strong arguments as to why involving educational developers in instructional consultation is crucial. They argue that consultation sometimes suffers from a lack of input based on the higher education research literature. This may result in the reinforcement of habits that are simply based on longstanding routines or in the 'reinvention' of what others in other disciplines might have accomplished already. Moreover, this kind of consultation may stop at the very practical level, instead of embracing the contextual richness of pedagogical practices.

Nevertheless, Hicks and Boud (*ibidem*) warn not to restrict educational development to initiatives put forward solely by educational developers, as this might engender discussions that might become detached from institutional and disciplinary realities. This might cause difficulties for the participants at the implementation level, as academics try to apply generic strategies to their specific contexts. Hanrahan, Ryan and Duncan (2001) corroborate this line of thinking when they state that contextualised consultation is paramount, as "centralized support personnel who understand and empathize with local interests may provide the necessary impetus and support for collaborative, and critical inquiry that might otherwise dissipate, given a tendency to preserve the status quo and local hierarchical structures" (Hanrahan *et al.*, 2001, p. 133).

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A notion commonly adopted in discussing the particular role of educational developers in instructional consultation is that of 'critical friend'. Handal (1999) asserts that critical friends engage in useful mutual critique that is well documented, argumentative, relevant and instructive. Handal, (1999, p. 64) argues that the idea of critical friendship includes:

- A personal relationship of confidence;
- Belief in the professional competence of the critical friend;
- Expectation of personal integrity;
- Basic trust in the good intentions of the critical friend.

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Central to Handal's argument is that this form of consultation is something academics practise daily with regard to their research, and should thus be appealing to them also when discussing pedagogical matters. Importantly, Handal integrates, within the notion of 'critical friendship', both the elements of professional expertise (what he calls 'competence') and counselling (to mean a type of affective engagement that is marked by confidence, integrity and trust). The notion of 'critical friendship' is, of course, an aspiration to work towards rather than a transparent strategy, as any developmental work is inevitably traversed by power relationships that must be progressively diffused for a constructive developmental work to happen. The biggest challenge of any educational consultation is precisely in working through and around power differentials and trust issues in order to achieve forms of dialogue with and between academics.

The notion of 'critical friendship', while being a useful heuristic device, suggests a *modus operandi* and a professional way of being that occur in neutral environments that are devoid of those power relationships which characterize all social encounters. Universities are embedded in and saturated by different values and beliefs systems clustered around different role positions. As we argue later in the paper, educational

developers need to engage with these systems, if they really aim at having impact on the institutional culture of which they are part.

The impact of one-to-one instructional consultation

A considerable amount of educational literature supports the argument that instructional consultation provided by educational developers, in one-to-one interactions, has indeed some impact on teaching improvement. In 2005, Rivers reviewed the research on the impact of educational development programmes on teachers' practice and beliefs. The data she presents, suggest that "consultation appears most effective when it assists teachers to interpret and reflect on feedback on their own performance. However, providing academics with information about their teaching may not be sufficient and unsupported feedback does not necessarily lead to improvement in teaching" (Rivers, 2005, p. 7). This points towards the importance of educational developers working with individual academics, from where the latter stand, both disciplinarily and pedagogically, thus facilitating effective reflection on their teaching (see also Finelli, Ott, Gottfried, Herschok, O'Neal & Kaplan, 2008 ; Hampton & Reiser, 2004). Based on his study about the impact of one-to-one consultation, Piccinin (1999) also makes the point that, from a developmental point of view, it is necessary to adapt instructional consultation to the needs of individual academics.

In a follow-up study, Piccinin and Moore (2002) add another element to explain the impact of instructional consultation: in addition to taking into account the needs of individual academics, taking time over the instructional consultation process seems to be important for development to occur. In practical terms, this means promoting a type of educational development that militates for a notion of learning based on reflective time rather than immediate impact (Di Napoli, 2010).

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Moreover, the analysis of the impact of instructional consultation on younger and older academics reveals that there is a significant difference between these groups. The former show significant improvement immediately after instructional consultation, while the latter show change only one to three years after the consultation. According to Piccinin and Moore (2002), the rooted habits and practices are the cause of the resistance made by older academics.

In sum, the evidence about the impact of one-to-one instructional consultation shows that educational developers may indeed become academics' critical friends, in Handal's terms. In a one-to-one relationship informed by a balance between rationality (professional feedback about teaching, evidence based discussion about alternatives) and affectivity

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(recognition of the specific needs of individual academics, respect for their pace of change, belief and value systems, trust) educational developers can make the difference. Instructional consultation needs to be mindful of the diversity of academic practices and identities, by which we mean those socio-psychological constructs that are personally, institutionally and discipline informed, through which academics perceive their work (Barnett & Di Napoli, 2008). Instructional consultation should always be careful to engage with these, lest any form of dialogue might look as being vitiated by top down policy enforcement that might, in fact, stop development rather than favouring it. The challenge of any effective form of instructional consultation is not just professional or epistemological. Most importantly, it is ontological, in the sense that it should assist in the transformation of those views and perspectives on which academics' sense of worth, beliefs and views are based (Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2007). The ontological challenge requires an ability to be 'in' with the academics, cognitively and affectively, while, at the same time, being able to step out in order to help academics reflect on their ideas, values and practices. It also implies allowing one's own views about learning and teaching gradually change in the course of that dialogue (and this concerns both academics and educational developers alike). It is in this dialogic double movement that the notion of educational consultation lies. This also implies the wider process of creating spaces for academics to dialogue about their practices, under the gentle and informed guidance of the developers.

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Evolutions in higher education challenging one-to-one instructional consultation

Over the last three decades, institutions for higher education have been facing numerous challenges. The student body has grown dramatically, not only in numbers, but also in diversity. Public expectations have become more explicit and stringent. Institutions for higher education can no longer simply appeal to their long standing research reputation but need to prove that they provide high quality teaching.

These challenges clearly demand more than the isolated actions of individual academics, within the context of individual courses and programmes; it also necessitates that academics work as a team, in terms of what D'Andrea and Gosling (2005) name as 'a whole institution approach'. Indeed, individual academics teaching particular courses are part of a bigger whole. In order to provide real quality learning experiences for the students, it is not only important that individual courses are 'taught well'. There is a need to recognise that individual actions and practices are part of an overall curriculum that should be aligned with wider institutional

and social contexts (Biggs, 1999 ; Huyghe, Creten, Totté, Clement & Buelens, 2009). In Europe, the still ongoing implementation of the Bologna declaration (1999), aiming at the creation of a coherent European Higher Education Area, has particularly made clear that consulting individual academics at the level of their courses, might not suffice as it does not allow to take fully into account the complexities of the curriculum and its socio-political background and articulations. Based on a comparative case study of the implementation of Bologna in five European universities, Clement, McAlpine and Waeytens (2004, p. 129) argue that "All academic development centres (...) clearly had to incorporate into their instructional development a strong focus on program and curriculum development". In order to stress the broader scope of consultation, we suggest a notion of educational consultation that emphasizes group engagement (as opposed to individual forms of it).

The question then arises as to how to organise and enact this kind of more choral educational consultation in the changing contexts of higher education. Handal (1999) voices his confidence about the power of educational development that is group (rather than) individual based. Referring to Lycke (1998), he discusses the role of educational developers working in and with collaborative reflective teams of academics. Both authors argue that an educational developer, taking the role of external critical friend, can be most helpful in engendering reflective teams, where the members act as each other's critical friends and comment on each other's individual practices. A good dose of courage and willingness to change is the 'secret' to make this work, as these are the basis for relationships based on mutual confidence and respect.

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We wonder, however, whether this will indeed suffice in those instances in which groups do not only sit together in order to collaborate, reflect and critique one another to improve their teaching quality, but also want to realise a joint project (such as for example, designing a new curriculum and/or establishing diversity in teaching and assessment methods). The challenges universities and programmes face nowadays pose common problems to groups of academics and encourage them to develop and implement a joint solution (think, for example, of the implementation and enactment of European directives). Such problems and issues undoubtedly have consequences at the level of individual practice but also exceed this level, and demand joint efforts and a group approach at a wider curriculum and institutional level. The question therefore arises as to whether acting as a solo educational developer relating to individual academics will suffice. Can we indeed suppose that educational consultation stays the same regardless of whether it is enacted in a one-to-one relationship or within a group that needs to define

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and strives for a common solution to a problem at the wider institutional and curriculum level? Can the notion of critical friend be considered to be a 'passe-partout' in both individual and group consultation? Is it indeed possible to act and be a critical friend of a whole group of academics and offer effective educational consultation that is evidence-based and mindful of both the cognitive and affective sides of the consultation process? Is it possible to take into account the needs and values of individual academics while operating at group level?

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In the following paragraphs, we present a possible model that takes into account these questions. This should be regarded as a heuristic device through and by which to think consultative processes among academics and educational developers.

Group educational consultation: from critical friendship to reflective-dialogic partnership

As we have already pointed out, current evolutions in higher education are exerting considerable pressure on the traditional approach to one-to-one instructional consultation. Institutional, national and international policies demand that academics coordinate each other to develop coherent programs defining their "learning outcomes" and fulfilling requirements of both the European and the national qualifications framework within the context of the Bologna process (Feutrie, 2010). It requires that academics work jointly to enact such policies in manners that are, as far as possible, cogent with local cultures, needs and practices (Warnier, Warnier, Parmentier, Leloup & Petrolito, 2010).

In our own experience, we have often worked as 'critical friends' of individual academics to help them find possible 'solutions' to given pedagogical problems that, in the end, did not fit either the curriculum as a whole or departmental and institutional practices, at large. On more than one occasion, academics informed us that individual solutions often created more problems than they solved, as students encountered misalignment in pedagogical practices across a department and the institution as a whole. This experience made us aware of the need to take into account the wider contexts in which educational development operates, especially at the level of the curriculum and policies. Consequently, our educational development evolved from a one-to-one to a group mode, with academics working with several educational developers, each contributing to the process from their own expertise to reflect on the possible consequences for the curriculum of the changes they made to individual courses to meet wider demands and pressures.

We have experienced that working with a group of academics on a

single topic, such as, for instance, the teaching strategies adopted in a specific disciplinary domain, very often leads to discussions about other topics (for example, how to align assessment to 'new' teaching strategies and what this implies for the envisaged learning outcomes at both the curriculum and course level). The strategy is now for a group of educational developers working together with a group of academics, through the coordination of an educational developer who acts as the coordinator of the whole process. The implications of any innovation for departmental and disciplinary practices are reflected upon in relation to academics' beliefs and values. This helps building a rounder and more contextual interest in pedagogical matters, as pedagogical issues become intertwined with academics' ontologies and wider institutional and social contexts. Spaces are opened for unsettling and examining assumptions (pedagogical, disciplinary, etc.) and beliefs, through a dialogic process that is facilitated in safe and respectful learning environments. Discussing pedagogical issues becomes the lever for critical and constructive debates about the purpose and scope of wider educational and social changes. Educational development happens here at the interface between the structural and the personal in an attempt to align the two in full dialogue. The look is multiple and hovers over both subjectivist and social contexts, in full recognition of the fact that neither can change without the other (Fook & Gardner, 2007).

This kind of approach requires specific abilities on the part of the educational developers to construct a trustworthy climate that facilitate the flourishing of a type of constructive critical reflections that are both informed by a high level of knowledge and sensitivity to individual, departmental, institutional and social issues. An ability to build trust among participants is paramount in this process and trust can be only achieved by adopting an open, serene but critical attitude towards everybody's thoughts, values and beliefs, including those of the educational developers. It is important that educational developers are perceived by academics to be themselves critical agents of current educational and social trends rather than the operational, pedagogical arm of quality regimes. Only by opening up the Pandora's box of values and beliefs, as they interlace with academic practice, can educational developers fruitfully dialogue with academics in a partnership fashion.

Dialogue needs trust, and trust requires a flexible and supple concept of time that escapes all forms of those 'immediate improvements' that may be expected by high management and governments alike. We are arguing here for developmental models whose time frames really facilitate deliberative spaces that are informed by honest and genuine dialogue among different parties, within a whole institution. Dialogue, in bakhtinian

sense, means working through the intricacies of intersubjectivities, in the spaces that open up when people, with different viewpoints and values, interact in the pursuit of reciprocal understanding (Mayerfeld Bell & Gardiner, 1998). This, in turn, requires the adoption of that reflective time that is so central to much academic life (Di Napoli, 2010). One thing is a type of educational development that is based upon giving top-down 'advice' that is acted upon, quickly, almost by 'decree', another is a kind of educational development that takes up and interweaves the subtle threads of values and beliefs, and takes into account the wider institutional and social contexts; one thing is a model of educational development that, however infused by good intentions, aims at solving pedagogical issues technically, another is a form of it that builds upon complexity and aims at opening up deliberative space that becomes "a bridge between the personal-existential and the political realms" (Tomlison, 2007, p. 134). Building such bridges is at the heart of any serious reflective-dialogic model that puts meaning-making, as the capacity to reflect and act upon the interface between the personal and the structural, at its very centre (Mackler, 2009).

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When working with a meaning-making model, it is necessary that a process of consultation is taken care of that avoids fragmentation and facile solutions, and takes into account professional expertise (like knowledge of change management, quality development and academic cultures), along with an ability to build open, critical dialogues that involve reflection on the complexities of any educational enterprise. Of course, this kind of educational development can work in parallel with more traditional consultative roles. However, if the aim is cultural innovation, within an institution, it is important that a more reflective and dialogic model is adopted.

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Nevertheless, a reflective-dialogic model also poses challenges. Picinnin (1999, p. 72) observed that "although some faculty request [individual] consultation on more than one occasion, the majority do not". Group educational consultation may be indeed a difficult endeavour, given issues of trust involved when sharing ideas and thoughts publicly, in front of both educational developers and other colleagues. Thus, in the first instance, getting group educational consultation started is the first hurdle one has to overcome. In order to achieve this, it is crucial not simply to wait for consultative requests to come from the academics themselves but academic developers having a more proactive role in stimulating discussions around issues that are important at both the disciplinary and institutional levels. Curiosity and interest need to be ignited. Educational developers, being often centrally placed in an institution, are ideally positioned to nurture this dialogic process. Their role becomes that of

relating the concerns of academics to other groups, including high management, and the other way round so that a dialogic flow is created.

Therefore, from a systemic point of view, it is important that educational developers create synergies and networks not just with and among academics but also with other partners such as deans, vice-deans for education, programme directors, learning technologists, librarians, etc. Partnership with different partners, at different levels of the organisation (Gosling, 2009 ; Havnes & Stensaker, 2006), offers educational developers the opportunity to take into the arena the broader contexts in which local pedagogical cultures operate. This type of educational development aims at bringing viewpoints, belief systems and attitudes into dialogue with one another. In this kind of model, educational developers become the conduits of dialogue between different parties. The final aim is to transform change into more purposeful, systemic innovation among partners who, in the process, become more familiar with each other's intentions, actions and the values in the attempt to solve common issues and problems that are vital for the life of a whole institution. It is in this dynamic framework of innovation that the real value of a reflective-dialogic partnership model can be found.

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This consultative model is predicated upon working alliances between academics, educational developers and other institutional groups. In practical terms, this may mean that a coordinating educational developer decides together with another partner (academic and academic-related) about the objectives of the consultation and the responsibilities of the respective partners. S/he is in charge of laying the cognitive and affective foundations for collaborative work (Robertson, 2000). S/he may also introduce other educational developers into the process, when need arises and more specialised advice is required. In this model, educational developers have an opportunity to listen to faculty-specific needs, initiate questions, introduce topics to discuss and involve other actors in the process.

Recently, a few authors (Green & Ruutz, 2008 ; Hanrahan *et al.*, 2001 ; Laksov, Mann & Dahlgren, 2008 ; McDonald & Star, 2006) have reported on how they actually did this in practice. What is common in their accounts is that they did not only connect actively to the existing significant networks of academics, but also involved broader groups both at the faculty and institutional level through significant links to centralized managerial and administrative systems. These authors illustrate how peer consultation, educational consultation led by an educational developer, and formal educational development initiatives (e.g. workshops) can go hand in hand in the pursuit of solutions that, while department of faculty

based, are firmly embedded in wider institutional and social concerns. Academics take the lead in defining what issues are relevant to them, while educational developers offer their specialist professional expertise to stimulate reflection, provide relevant insights, also from the educational literature, set up relevant reflective activities and involve other institutional groups and constituencies. In this dynamic process, educational developers become the facilitators of dialogue and partnerships among different institutional actors. It is a complex and iterative process that has at its heart the very notion of becoming and possibility, rather than static and ad hoc solutions (Semetsky, 2006).

The notion of reflective-dialogic partnership aims to promote a kind of educational development that embraces complexities and avoid simplistic forms of pragmatism. Reflective-dialogic partnerships require that educational developers adopt a wider professional lens through which both local and wider educational perspectives are filtered. In this sense, being an educational developer means becoming the facilitator of a dialogic process. This is, inherently, a political programme (anything that has to do with value is inherently political) that intends to actively contribute to the enactment of the idea of a university as a dialogic space.

Conclusions

Based on the review of literature on instructional consultation, we have argued that consultation is a very common element of academic culture and a valuable strategy to understand the complexities of learning and teaching. The traditional one-to-one instructional consultation has been challenged by educational group-to-group consultation as an alternative, which acknowledges these complexities and where educational developers become the facilitators of a dialogic process, building on partnerships among different institutional actors. Typically such a dialogue involves reflection and engages with different values and beliefs systems.

This perspective opens fundamental questions such as ethical ones: dialogue constitutes the ethical basis of the university project and educational consultation for real development belongs to this project and requires a moral purposefulness (Nixon, 2008).

It further opens a new research agenda. How reflective-dialogic partnerships within educational consultation are enacted by educational developers, but also by the other institutional actors, such as academics, educational leaders, etc. How do they perceive their respective roles in that dialogic process? What are the outcomes of such educational consultation, not only for the main actors of the consultation but also on teaching and learning activities and student learning? What are specific

and local conditions that are key conditions for successful strategies?

Such studies should make it possible to better define effectiveness conditions of the educational consultations regarded as reflective-dialogic partnerships.¹

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