Communities of Ethical Practice: Using New Technologies for Ethical Dialectical Discourse

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ABSTRACT
The authors report on a project in which a new experiential form of professional learning combined ethical thinking processes with a collaborative meeting technology known as the Zing team learning system (ZTLS). A new software program called Working Wisely was built by the completion of the project. The ZTLS in combination with Working Wisely facilitates communities of practice (Fleer, Edwards, Hammer, Kennedy, Ridgway, Robbins, & Surman, 2006; Wenger, 1998) focused on ethical issues. The participants in the pilot project included 10 staff members of an early childhood education facility (long day care centre) who met for a series of professional development sessions in a learning community that combined industry, university, and commercial stakeholders. By the end of the project, participants were able to move their knowledge from individual tacit knowledge to shared articulated knowledge with an ethical focus. This paper focuses on the facilities that were embedded in the software to develop thinking and discourse processes. The authors faced challenges in translating paper-based thinking processes with numerous steps into simple methods that could be undertaken on an information communication technology (ICT) platform using the ZTLS. These were resolved by the development of miniature and iterative dialectical thinking processes within thinking steps that facilitated discourse. The use of dialectical and ethical discourse in this community of practice led to positive outcomes and has considerable potential in many other areas of academic endeavor. We have called our new type of interaction Ethical Dialectical Discourse.

Keywords
Professional learning, Ethical discourse, Information communication technology, Team learning, Zing

Introduction

Human diversity and difference are increasingly acknowledged in literature and valued in contemporary education and care contexts. Now, more than ever, professional educators need to deal with complex issues and work hard to avoid marginalising some people, or to negotiate or resolve misunderstandings. Issues frequently arise at the confluence of different belief systems, lifestyles, sexual orientation, ability, moral positions, and the cultural norms of parents, children, and co-workers (Newman, Mercer, Fleming, & Michail, 2004). Professionals, particularly those working in children’s centres, are often unable to easily gain access to professional development courses to learn about contemporary professional and societal changes and expectations. Workshop-based courses delivered by professionals are difficult to arrange for this group because of limited financial support, long working hours, early starting times, late finishing times, shift work, and the isolation of small workplaces. “One-off” staff development sessions are also increasingly recognised as unsustainable. Despite current imperatives in our globalised ICT-based knowledge economy (Newman & Ashton, 2007), many individuals in this population have limited access to e-learning courses because they are inexperienced computer users with basic or no computer skills and have extremely limited access to computers in classrooms, offices, or homes. This situation is exacerbated by limited resources for hardware and software purchase, repair, and upgrading. The population includes many mature-aged women who have not grown up using computers, have little desire to use computers for work or leisure, and at home are the last person to get a turn on the family computer.

Development of a project for early childhood staff team learning: purpose and procedures

In response to needs identified by Penrith City Council, in outer Western Sydney, NSW, Australia, the authors created a series of 10 staff development workshops to conduct with a child-care centre staff. The purpose was to
more soundly underpin staff interactions with families on ethical practice and to develop their technology skills. We aimed to shine a light on their dealings with parents, but also with each other and the children, with a view to improving ethical practice for sustainable change. In this paper our focus is on outlining the process undertaken, rather than on detailed investigation of results. While we are reporting on a small regional development project, rather than a research project, we feel that our tentative findings lay the groundwork for later research and indicate the potential of the ZTLS in conjunction with the ethical and dialectical discourse that we outline later in the paper.

The ZTLS is a tool designed to support higher-order thinking and human interaction (Findlay, 2003). Fitzgerald and Findlay (2006, p. 2) claim such tools are “no longer merely desirable but now essential if humans are to productively engage with the increasing complexity and uncertainty that arises from accelerating technological and social change.” The ZTLS helps users to take on the role of facilitator or teacher. It consists of a number of computer keyboards (in this project, we used one per participant), one computer, and a projected display. It allows for remote connection of users via the Internet, but in this project participants met face to face. One person in each session was designated facilitator and had control of the software. During the project, facilitation was commenced by the commercial partner (author 2), quickly assumed by the university partner (author 1), and shortly afterwards taken on by several child-care centre staff. Participants each contributed their ideas using their keyboard, following small group discussion, in response to trigger questions or images on the screen. Everyone could see the ideas on the screen as they were being generated, allowing for scaffolding and knowledge building. The facilitator then encouraged participants to pull out the main themes or ideas from each response to generate a collaborative team response. What resulted was a thinking or decision-making journey (Fitzgerald & Findlay, 2006), generated by the team and recorded within the program for future reference and emailing to participants at the end of the session.

The ZTLS concept was designed to create contexts and spaces for thinking and learning and is partially based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), who believed that humans develop through the engagement with tools such as language and signs, which involves not only the transformation of cognitive capacities in the individual but in human society as well. Fitzgerald and Findlay argue that the next generation of learners is becoming more independent of their parents and teachers through the use of advanced tools such as computers, multimedia, and the Internet. They argue that if we are to prepare people for a world in which “work, knowledge and communities are being radically and constantly transformed” (Downes, Fluck, Gibbons, Leonard, Matthews, Oliver, Vickers, & Williamson., 2001, p. 16), then new kinds of tools which are more relational and reflective are needed to give young people the opportunity to access, design, create, facilitate, and improve their own learning activities (Fitzgerald & Findlay, 2006). The theory that informs the ZTLS is in line with current thinking in early childhood education, which draws on post-modern approaches to engage with the complexities and diversities inherent in work with children and families.

The project consisted of ten two-hour workshops. What was covered in each session was somewhat limited by the tiredness of participants by the end of an eight-hour day with children and families followed by the two-hour sessions. This is noted as an issue for the professional development of early childhood practitioners. Workshop 1 took the form of an orientation to the project, familiarisation with the technology, ethics protocols, the completion of a short survey, and an ethics audit of the centre. The survey and audit were repeated at the end of the program. Over subsequent workshops, extensive exploration of personal values was the focus of sessions, and more time was spent on this aspect than was originally anticipated as complex and conflicting views emerged and were discussed and documented. As workshops progressed, the focus shifted to exploration of professional values and the process of documenting the team’s values in relation to children, colleagues, families, the profession, and the community. This was accompanied by an attempt to draft “if-then” statement such as “if we respect children, we respect children by… (insert action).” The intention was to complete a values statement as the foundation for curriculum development. This aspect of the documentation was not able to be completed because extra time had been spent at the start on the personal values aspect of the program, but the centre staff intended to continue with their work after the project finished. Staff were introduced to the Ethical Response Cycle (ERC) (Newman & Pollnitz, 2001), which is a process-based model for the investigation and resolution of ethical issues. By the end of the project, the staff who attended the last workshop had each pledged to work on one aspect identified in the summative ethics audit as in need of attention.

The project brought together two new tools for the first time. The Ethical Response Cycle is a process (available both on paper and digitally) for exploring and resolving ethical dilemmas. It was combined with the computer-based team learning system (ZTLS). The ERC provides a structured thinking approach for the resolution of competing professional, legal, and ethical considerations. It provides a guideline process for thinking through, acting upon, and
documenting issues, problems, or dilemmas that have an ethical component (Newman & Pollnitz, 2002). It contains eight phases that encourage users to consider their dilemma in relation to legal issues, professional issues (codes and policies, etc.), ethical principles (five are suggested), ethical theory (three paradigms are suggested) and “Informed Inclination,” a professional concept introduced in the ERC. The final three phases prompt the user to make a decision, take action, and document the action. The whole process is surrounded by reflection and negotiation. The two tools were used as a springboard for the development of a new software title called *Working Wisely*. This software provides a framework and process for context-specific development of values-based curriculum frameworks.

*Working Wisely*, using the ZTLS, supports decision making or learning groups engaged in higher-order thinking and human interaction (Findlay, 2003). It does not rely on the presence of an expert in the topic under discussion as question sequences previously crafted by an expert in the content area provide the triggers for group discussion. Images or provocations (diagrams, photos, etc.) often support the questions. The tool’s embedded etiquette guides the facilitator as participants work through a talk-type-read-review process for each question. Thus, it is a perfect tool in communities of practice where knowledge is shared rather than hoarded away for personal use (Ford, 1997, cited by Kenyon & Hase, 2001). For example, a warm-up question asks participants to nominate their favourite children’s story and asks why. The talk phase of the embedded etiquette often sees participants recalling childhood memories. These memories are triggered by each other to enable participants to recall not only the story, but the context and the feelings involved. The “why” quickly draws out values related to relationships, family, safety, security, etc. When shared with the group, rich meaning around adult-child relationships emerges. A sensemaking (Weick, 1979) step in this procedure helps participants transform their tacit knowledge into prototypical concepts, models, rules, methods, and theories. For example, one module in *Working Wisely* called “two mums” takes participants through a scenario in which a Master’s student, deputy school principal, and press secretary grapple with personal and political issues related to diverse family patterns, such as “What happens when your funding body doesn’t like a video you have made that depicts a successful family as having two mothers or a parent with a severe disability?” Participants are first guided through the steps that allow them to examine the ideas and issues with the help of the ethical theory and processes embedded in the questions and images. They are then asked to look at the process they have undertaken and design their own prototype or process for the resolution of future dilemmas they may encounter.

Embedding the ERC within the ZTLS facilitates meaning-making, deliberating, and theorizing, which are essential elements in both the development of the practical wisdom (Goodfellow, 2003) that underpins Informed Inclination (Newman & Pollnitz, 2001) and ethical dialectical discourse. The delivery method also offers a means of subtly improving computer skills and motivation to use technology. One participant had previously never touched a keyboard, and was quite reluctant to do so at the beginning of the project. Her response in the final evaluation, when asked, “Think back to your first Zing session. How did you feel about the session?” was “PAINFUL.” By the end, however, participants were waiting for her to finish because she was so keen to record her views.

The ZTLS software can be used in place of an accomplished adult to scaffold learners and provide learning support (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), creating rich meaning in ethical conversations. This also occurs via a process of bootstrapping or building upon each other’s ideas. The facilitator encourages participants to identify and extract the main themes, concepts, or ideas from each group of responses to formulate new memetic (Dawkins, 1976) units, which are prototype units of knowledge. The facilitator needs only to know how to set up and operate the computer system and how to follow the ZTLS etiquette. Different learning styles are integrated through an embedded talk-type-read-review process. By following this process, a dynamic and powerful learning community is created. Early in the project, participants were already encouraging each other to draw common themes from their individual responses.

In the *Working Wisely* project, participants discussed each topic in dyads to allow the maximum amount of interaction in the shortest possible time. The group was allocated three to ten minutes to discuss a topic before contributing their own ideas via the keyboard. The workshops comprised sequences of questions ranging from initial exploration of personal values through to development of professional values for the team in a variety of areas. Documentation of frameworks for ethical practice in curriculum planning and implementation resulted. Images acted as stimuli for the group to discuss and generate ideas. Each workshop was prepared a few days prior to delivery following input from participants at the end of the prior session. Feedback was used to design the next question sequence. At the conclusion of the project, the workshop questions and a question set from another project were incorporated into the collaborative *Working Wisely* software (Findlay & Newman, 2005).
Our theoretical rationale

Conceptualising ethical dialectical discourse

Our work was informed and influenced by theoretical perspectives relating to sociocultural learning in communities of practice, ethics, discourse, and professional wisdom. We used a case study approach as it is generally recognised as the most effective way to learn about professional applied ethics (Newman & Pollnitz, 2005). Ethical theory was introduced within a series of scenarios and then applied to real cases to build ethical knowledge and strategies. Ethical dilemmas are used to provide a rich environment in which to explore and resolve complex issues with numerous competing and often equally valid imperatives to consider. Such an approach is a good fit as we move beyond the knowledge age (Findlay, 1997; Findlay, Crawford, & Lee, 2002) to a wisdom age, in which the most important activity is the wise application of knowledge and values (Findlay, Crawford, & Lee, 2002; Lakoff, 2002). Discussion of cases and dilemmas can be enriched as the facilitator guides participants towards higher levels of human interaction.

Case-study methodology was enriched in the development of Working Wisely with adult learning approaches that move learners towards the heutagogy, a self-directed approach to learning that underpins our approach (Ashton & Newman, 2006), which supports collaborative team learning. Six kinds of discourse (Jenlink, 2001) also informed the development of Working Wisely and partially led to the development of our new concept of ethical dialectical discourse.

Creating rich meaning in ethical conversations

In conceptualising ethical dialectical discourse we chose to build on some existing paradigms. Each paradigm has its benefits and accompanying shortcomings for rich, ethically based conversations in communities of practice. Professionals need the language and the language tools of ethical dialectical discourse to explore, come to terms with, and resolve complex ethical issues within their learning communities. We now examine the components of discourse that we have drawn from to create the concept of ethical dialectical discourse.

Discourse

Jenlink (2001) describes six kinds of discourse:

1. **Monologue**, which is one-way communication and rule-following (Isaacs & Senge, 1999), where one person speaks and others may listen with little or no counter-influences of ideas.

2. **Discussion**, which is rule-revealing (Isaacs & Senge, 1999), where views are exchanged in an adversarial way with little or no interpenetration of ideas.

3. **Dialogue**, which can be of two types, reflective or generative, the former being rule-reflecting (Isaacs & Senge, 1999) and the latter rule-creating, in which the participants are open to each other and suspend judgment, beliefs, and assumptions in the interest of creating new knowledge that simultaneously serves the group and individual interests.

4. **Dialectical**, originally considered to be disciplined inquiry using rational argument sometimes presented as truth and which is equally rule-revealing and adversarial. Dialectical discourse has also been interpreted by others as transformational and integrative (Engestrom, 1987), where the differences are resolved into a new and more complete idea or concept about which the participants in the discourse may assign new meaning.

5. **Ethical** (Banathy, 1996), which is controlled by social rules — values, morals, and ethics — but which interacts at the boundaries of complex cultural systems and can also be a tool for the wise application of knowledge.

6. **Post-formal** (Horn, 1999), which could also be called transcendental, and is a discussion about power and the consequences of the discourse in which we are engaged, and which is shaped by patterns, processes, and contexts. McLean describes a similar level of discourse as social reconstructivist (1999).

Ethical dialectical discourse

Professional ethical wisdom is underpinned by informed discourse, reflection at the social reconstructivist/ethical level (McLean, 1999), and notions of transcendental discourse (Horn, 1999). The discourse model employed by the
Working Wisely program in the ZTLS context employs elements of dialogical, dialectical, ethical, and transcendental discourse to develop ethical wisdom informed by ethical dialectical discourse.

Ethical dialectical discourse moves beyond any of the aforementioned individual discourse concepts because it

- is disciplined inquiry
- uses rational argument but is not adversarial
- is rule-creating
- is reflective, generative, and integrative
- allows participants to be open to each other and suspend assumption and judgment
- considers values, morals, and ethics
- considers complex cultural systems
- considers power and consequence, and
- is socially and cognitively transformative.

We believe that ethical dialectical discourse contains the potential for transformation and for the application of professional wisdom in complex times.

Developing the team learning system guided questioning process: our challenges

During the course of the project the authors, particularly author 1, faced a number of challenges in translating accustomed thinking about the preparation of traditional workshops and professional ethics content into a collaborative computer-based inquiry environment that incorporated ethical dialectical discourse. Talking about ethics is abstract at any time, and some thinking processes are difficult to capture as pre-defined questions. The facilitation method required to engage in thinking in this manner was new to author 1, and the ethics content was new to author 2. If the authors of the program were to create a successful software program to move users from a basic understanding of professional ethics to a more sophisticated, analytical, ethical, and dialectical method of higher-order thinking, their own thinking required adaptation too.

The ZTLS system presents open-ended questions that guide the participants through a pre-determined thinking journey that emulates the kind of thinking that a domain expert would undertake. Six main kinds of question processes were employed to facilitate ethical dialectical discourse in this project. We have adopted the following nomenclature to reflect the purpose of the level of question and the guided questioning process: orientation, sequential, extended sequential, self-revealing, conditional, and integrative questions.

Orientation

The orientation questions are presented when a group is using the ZTLS for the first time. The way in which the first three questions are presented is critical to the successful use of the tool. The first question allows participants to find where their responses will be located on the screen, in which writing space their entries will appear, and how to use their keyboard to edit ideas or submit them to the common space. Following are orientation questions from Workshop 1 (Working with the Joys and Challenges):

- Type anything you like: the words of your favourite song, a list of what you had for breakfast, or “the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.”
- What is your favourite children’s story and why?
- Describe the nicest/most fantastic/rewarding moment(s) in your work with children or in children’s services.

When the second and third questions are presented, the facilitator models the ZTLS talk-type-read-review etiquette, sharing ideas, reading ideas aloud, and seeking out the underlying concepts and themes from the ideas of the group. The etiquette has a similar function to the think-pair-share method (Lyman, 1987) used in non-ZTLS settings, which requires participants to think alone first, then discuss with a neighbour before sharing their ideas with other participants who both see and hear all responses. This allows for auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic learning. Such methods orchestrate the way participants interact with each other and contribute to the overall “dialectical” integration in an iterative manner. The orientation questions also serve as a way of helping the group develop a level
of comfort with each other and quickly move participants from the general (Question 1) towards the professional and values based (Questions 2 & 3). There is also a team formation effect (Findlay, 1997).

Sequential

The sequential questions have a simple logic that requires little facilitator intervention. The facilitator merely follows the talk-type-read-review etiquette for each question. This type of minimal intervention by a facilitator, sometimes known as servant leadership (Jackson, 1986), is the highest form of facilitation because it transfers responsibility for the activity to the participants, who take ownership because they believe they have achieved everything by themselves (Heider, 1985). Scaffolds within each question are used to direct attention, especially in situations where participants may have had difficulty understanding the question or are unable or unlikely to generate ideas without some assistance. Scaffolds may also be used to encourage responses to fit a particular format. Usually the questions are arranged in a specific order, which allows participants to collect data about a topic and, via the thinking process, convert that data into some higher form such as a concept, mind map, check list, action plan, or decision. These questions are from Workshop 3 (the Shoulds and the Should Nots):

- Think back to something you did as a child or a teenager that you are proud of. In 25 words, without necessarily describing the specific incident, write about why you were proud and what made you do what you did.
- Think back to something you did as a child or a teenager that you are not proud of. In 25 words, without necessarily describing the specific incident, write about what was not right, fair, honest, kind, caring, or just about what you did and why you think you did it.

The inclusion of words like “fair,” “honest,” and “just” flags the beginning of the embedded introduction of ethical theory and begins to introduce the language and prototypes for ethical decision-making.

![ATM Fairy](image)

**Figure 1.** Automatic Teller Machine Fairy image

Extended sequential

The extended sequential questions often incorporate an image as a stimulus. This type of questioning approach was applied to a series of dilemmas that allowed the participants to experience the dynamics of a hypothetical situation. A rich description of each stage of the dilemma is presented as an image (see Fig. 1) attached to a short version of the
question that asks each participant to describe what he/she would do under the circumstances. The dilemma sequence becomes more complex as the workshop proceeds. These questions are from Workshop 2 (Adhering to the Unenforceable):

- The “Automatic Teller Fairy” has been helping out many people in your town for a week now. Word has spread. The error has been discovered and rectified. The Daily Bulletin reports the names of everyone who used the teller and how often. Your mother rings that night to say she saw your name in the paper. What do you say and why?
- How do you feel when your employer raises the issue the next day, and why?

**Self-revealing**

A third type of question used in the workshop, known as self-revealing, was designed to challenge and help participants to examine their own instinctive patterns of behaviour and discover their own values and own biases in interacting with people from backgrounds different from their own or who have different beliefs or values. Participants viewed an image (see Figure 2) and then described what they saw. The image was displayed a second time, this time with a description of what was really happening. Figure 2 shows one of the images, a photograph of the first author and a friend sitting on the floor eating food with their hands in India. The following sequence is from Workshop 8, What Values are Represented Here?

- Write about what you can see in this picture.
- This is what was really happening.
- List some of your personal values including your ideals, principles, qualities, accomplishments, actions, and circumstances.

![Figure 2. Values Session image](image-url)

This workshop arose following a conversation among the project members about the appropriateness of allowing children in the centre (who were from a variety of cultural backgrounds) to eat food with their fingers.

**Conditional**

The conditional questioning process requires participants to collect information which then becomes the subject of the next thinking process. This was one of two processes which proved challenging for the software developers to
capture in a way that was easy for a facilitator to routinely follow. The software allows the facilitator to add a thinking process at any time and attach this to any idea that has been generated. The facilitator can also “drill down” to explore an issue in more or minute detail.

The purpose of this process was to examine personal and professional values with a view to developing a context-specific values-based curriculum framework for the early childhood centre. The participants decided who the important stakeholders in their working lives were. Then they decided what was important in relation to each group in order to define the value base of their early childhood service. They then linked desired actions to the values chosen. The stakeholders identified by the group were staff, children, families, the community, and the early childhood profession. The aim was to help bridge the common dissonance between espoused values and values in action.

Workshop 9, (Working with Stakeholders), began with participants brainstorming a list of stakeholders of the childcare centre followed by a list of values to guide interactions with each stakeholder as stakeholders would differ for each group of users. Following this, for each value selected, participants were asked (e.g., for the stakeholder group “children”):

- Explain why we should have this value? e.g., for respect, because children are citizens in their own right.
- How would we use this value? e.g., for respect, ask children what they think.

One purpose of this elaboration was to encourage participants to articulate their team values and resultant practice. The documented values can be used as the basis of communication with families, as proactive planning for ethical practice, and as a service evaluation process. A prototype was built that allowed participants to articulate “if I believe this, then I will do this” statements.

![Figure 3. Drilling down four layers to explore values related to stakeholders](image)

Such a conditional process that drilled down four layers could not be incorporated easily into a logical, sequential thinking process or prepared in advance and applied to all stakeholders to be identified. The solution found by the authors was to present the entire process across four layers using the multiple layers mode of the software. In this way, each stage of the brainstorm was made visible, including the list of stakeholders identified in the session and the
values related to each, accompanied by the linked actions (See Figure 3), in which the lower eight boxes are participant playspaces where ideas are created. Ideas accumulate in the upper space, the teamspace. Here the teamspace is divided into four layers to allow the facilitator to drill down to explore the relationship among stakeholders, a value, and the reason for holding that value.

**Integrative**

The Ethical Response Cycle, which is at the heart of *Working Wisely*, is an integrative questioning process that requires participants to engage in a dialectical or ethical social re-constructivist style of discourse that we have now named ethical dialectical discourse. The ERC process results in the creation of a unique new idea or position through iterative integrative thinking informed by ethical considerations.

When the authors first attempted to translate the original ERC into a ZTLS sequence, they encountered unanticipated difficulties. The problem was that the structure of many thinking processes is not obvious and, in sessions not supported by technology, flexibility is achieved by expert facilitators switching modes and taking shortcuts with the process, often in response to on-the-spot nonverbal cues from participants. If the facilitator does not explain the change in the focus of attention to the group, the participants can become disoriented and uncertain of what to do. Most facilitators do this instinctively and would not be able to articulate their methodology. In the computer-supported facilitations, the change of mode became much more obvious, and we needed to deconstruct the process to create a solution.

When fully documented for *Working Wisely* development, the ERC was found to involve eight phases (the law, professional considerations, ethical principals, ethical theories, Informed Inclination and a judgment, action and documentation). These eight phases then contain 26 separate steps. If followed assiduously in a software program, rather than in its original form as a thinking process, this would have been de-motivating for participants and so time-consuming that they would be unlikely to revisit the methodology.

In response to the authors’ own dilemma about how to capture the process in an effective, engaging, time-efficient and yet still thorough manner, we devised integrated questions that we feel still represent the ERC with integrity. The revised process has only eight steps, but within each step is a series of sub-processes that require the participant to engage in a miniature thinking process, before submitting a response. Each step is accompanied by an image with a check list of things to think about at that stage of the process.

Through engagement with the process of the images and thinking steps, participants undertaking ethical dialectical discourse in the community of ethical practice can collaborate on the resolution of current, contextually based issues.

**Some snapshots of the Zing *Working Wisely* project**

**Values and knowledge**

The focus of this paper is on the development of the *Working Wisely* platform rather than on reporting full findings about participants’ development of ethical practice; however, it is limiting to discuss one without the other so some examples are also presented here. Because of the small number of participants, we make no claims for statistical reliability. Our initial feelings from this small pilot project were that the marriage of the ZTLS with experiential ethical dilemmas and a robust dilemma resolution process was an engaging and successful way to learn about ethics and apply ethics in a meaningful way. The focus of evaluation was on the ethics content, rather than on the ICT tool. However one participant, in evaluating the workshops, said, “The technology of Zing and its use was great — very interesting. The discussions and self-awareness of our own belief systems were eye-opening.” Another said “… The technology was explained well and the system was reasonably easy to use.” People in the project who had never previously used computers were able to easily use the system, and staff quickly stepped forward to take on the role of facilitator. Belinda said, “I really enjoyed attending and ‘facilitating’ these workshops. I would enjoy imparting my new knowledge with other groups.” Participants found that they acquired an increased understanding of their roles as ethical professionals while participating in entertaining or real-life play with situations or issues.
When used well, the tool supported ethical dialectical discourse, although at times the groups reverted to other less robust forms of discourse such as discussion or monologue, which can have a lesser effect on the knowledge creation process if the facilitator is not careful to maintain momentum and control over the process. One participant reported that “some [sessions were] a little boring and others made you think.” This participant missed several sessions and seemed less involved than others. A follow-up interview would have been useful but was not possible at the time. Reclaiming robust discourse when participants became disengaged was achieved by a counter-intuitive method of minimalist but clear and well-executed interventions embedded in the ZTLS etiquette. This was timed to provide scaffolding for the learners as required.

Throughout the project, we needed to be aware of limitations. Initially, in the project described, the dyadic discussion model embedded in the tool’s etiquette was resisted by participants. They seemed initially more comfortable to share ideas with a chosen friend/colleague than with an immediate “neighbour” around the table. They preferred, overall, to quickly type in their own ideas. Participants did however accept monologue or group discussion with turn taking as a way of conversing. Where views were expressed by an authority/power figure (director or project leader), there was initially a tendency by some to copy the responses. It is also possible that participants did not respond publicly but may well have entertained their own views privately. In the project evaluation, one participant summed this up in response to a question about what was learnt. She said “not to copy Jan” (the director). Interestingly, it had been noted by the project leader that the director began to slow her entry of typed responses, presumably to allow her staff to form and express their own ideas in response to noticing some participants “copying Jan.” She had previously expressed a genuine desire to the project leader for the team to express their tacit knowledge and build team understandings.

After several rounds of question asking, participants began to adopt the etiquette and were able to engage in higher-level discourse automatically. Staff became genuinely interested in what their colleagues thought or felt about issues, especially if those ideas resonated with or complemented their own or offered a perspective they had not previously considered. Belinda said “[The sessions] were great. The small groups and interactions were very informative as quite often these issues are not ‘pulled apart,’ just discussed. They made me think and relate it to my own practice.” The workshop experience was a fertile ground for the development of practical wisdom (Goodfellow, 2003) as participants drew from their professional experience and built upon previous knowledge and practice to create new knowledge. “PA system” (some participants used pseudonyms) said, “I think the workshops were great and made people more aware of how different people can interpret the same thing in different ways.”

Instances of dialectical discourse (Isaacs & Senge, 1999) were evident and captured within the programme when the participants sought to resolve the conflict between their competing stances and build new knowledge. Also evident were examples of ethical discourse in which participants developed new understandings across the boundaries of complex cultural systems and social rules (Banathy, 1996). Post-formal or transcendental discourse (Horn, 1999) was evident in consideration of how participants’ discourse would impact others (for example, children and families). In response to the questions about the values the participants felt should be espoused by the staff of the centre, for example, participants cited “respect,” “nurturing,” “celebrating differences,” “freedom of expression and acceptance of differing levels of achievement,” and “caring relationships.” The participants then explored how each value would be implemented. For the “respect” value, the participants expressed a much richer variety of actionable activities than they did when they embarked on the program nine months earlier. In summarizing the responses of the group, participants said they would celebrate differences by listening to children; be aware of the child and his/her family and respond to the differences; act on children’s interests and capabilities; help children feel good about themselves and others; ask their families what they think is important for their child to learn about and do; and plan for each child’s individual needs, strengths, and interests in a flexible and spontaneous environment. They also provided justification for their actions, such as the following comments: “because every child is an individual and we should cater to their needs and abilities,” “to gain a sense of self through their own beliefs and attitudes,” “because we all deserve respect and have a right to be different,” and “children should learn about respect.”

In the evaluation of the program, the participants gave examples of how they had changed during the activity and had developed as professionals. One participant said, “The [ERC] was a good learning tool — particularly for those who are impulsive in decision-making.” Another said, “[The project] has allowed [me] to question and consider my own [values?] and strengthen some in particular. It has enabled me to grow professionally, and this in turn will help in the decision[s] I make with children, families, staff, and life.” Participants moved towards a higher level of reflection (social reconstructivist/ethical) (McLean, 1999) as they engaged and built their Informed Inclination based on new professional knowledge and added experience (Newman & Pollnitz, 2001). Although we did not set out to research
the use of ethical dialectical discourse in this project, we are encouraged to think that it is possible within communities of practice, such as the one we experienced. Research in this area with larger numbers of participants would allow us to confirm or re-consider our inclinations. Research around ethical dialectical discourse using different methodologies would also be useful.

During the course of the project, the styles of response from the participants became more robust and more considered, and exhibited greater explanatory depth. Participants who were initially hesitant or unengaged displayed motivation and interest and grew in confidence, not only in their newfound ability to discuss a complex issue, but also in their ability to express their own divergent opinions. Earlier in the project, they were unwilling or unable to express their ideas in such an articulate manner. They began to use the language of an early childhood professional discussing ethical issues rather than the previous practice of taking a day-to-day superficial and lay, or personal, views and explanations for events that had happened. For example, “when planning for the centre we look at individual needs taking into account individuals’ requirements and beliefs. Each child has an individual profile, menus are planned for each child’s needs, [and] parents’ beliefs and values are taken into [account].”

Through the use of concepts that were for them initially new and lacking in meaning, the participants began to articulate their professionalism. One member focused on her own increased feeling of professionalism and her renewed appreciation of her profession in her evaluative reflections, reporting verbally that she now “felt much more like a professional than a child-minder.” They became more willing to integrate the ideas that they had heard or saw others express and thus moved from their own tacit knowledge to a more academic, theoretically based type of knowledge that was shared across the group. They were, in effect, engaging in a process of knowledge creation. As a post-script, in 2008, two of the participants embarked on tertiary study.

During the project another noticeable feature was the growth in cultural awareness, both of the group learning culture and of issues to do with the cultural backgrounds of colleagues, children, and families. Staff were observed influencing others to change their behaviour if they did not fully engage with the process or regard the content seriously. People became more aware of their own biases including their previously personal, superficial, and simplistic approach to dealing with complex issues. As one participant importantly noted in her evaluation, she wasn’t sure whether she had changed much (others noted changes in her) but she was now aware that her opinions were personal and that she did have biases. This was a huge shift from a desire to impose “normality” onto others from her position of power. At the end of the project, in response to a question about what “ethics is,” the three main themes to emerge were “doing the right thing,” “beliefs and morals,” and “decision making.” There was a noticeable shift in participant responses as to why ethics is important in their work. Initially, responses were varied, including “ethics helps us make decisions in the work of children’s development” and “ethics expresses our morals.” Post project, responses clustered into two themes related to making “good,” “fair,” or “best” decisions and the awareness that decisions affect a number of people, especially young children. These responses reflect a deeper and broader understanding of professional ethics.

Two participants stopped coming to workshops and it was not possible to find out why, although the director did feel that it was for personal family reasons rather than having anything to do with the project or the methodology.

**ICT dispositions and skills**

The project resulted in the transfer of facilitator skills to the first author (university partner) and subsequently to some members of the child-care centre staff. The second author (commercial partner) began the process of transfer by informing participants of his intention to achieve some kind of skill development during the project. At the start of the first session, the second author informed the group that anyone who wished to become the facilitator should observe what he was doing and saying to conduct the session and to use that as a model for when she became a facilitator. He also let the participants know that the first author would be the first person to be trained in how to facilitate the sessions and that all the participants were expected to help remind her of the mouse and key strokes required as well as the instructions needed and whether or not these instructions should be made clearer. This approach to learning put the university partner and the team on the same level with the technology, taking away some of her “expert” and power status. It helped to create a community of practice, rather than the traditional, expert-led professional development project. The first author assumed facilitation responsibility by session two and, after two sessions as facilitator, handed over responsibility for the technical facilitation to one of the child-care centre staff.
who volunteered her interest in performing the role. Neither the first author or staff members had any prior experience with the technology nor were they highly ICT literate at the time.

Another positive change in participants’ attitudes towards the project and skill development became evident. Members of the staff were initially unable or unwilling to take responsibility for setting up the meeting room or ZTLS technology in advance to allow a timely start to sessions. They were understandably tired after an eight-hour child-care day. At the beginning of the project, the training room had not been cleared and prepared prior to the arrival of the project leader (first author). At the start of the project, most participants lacked the motivation to undertake the program and saw it as an avenue to achieving some time off from their regular duties. A data projector had to be acquired from the Council head office each time the system was to be used. A computer had to be borrowed as the centre did not have a laptop computer for use. Sessions were sometimes held a month apart and at other times a week apart, depending on the centre’s circumstances and what was to be done between sessions. Between sessions some equipment vital to the proper functioning of the system went missing or had to be obtained from the head office. As the project progressed, it was pleasing to see participants keen to begin sessions, unwilling to cancel sessions, keen to prepare the room for sessions, willingly and independently collecting the projector from Council headquarters, and setting up the equipment. They were also capable of running sessions independently by the end of the project.

Conclusions

Although the strength of our findings is limited by the scope of this small project, we are encouraged to continue our work in this area with some formal research in the future. The integration of the Zing collaborative learning technology and the Ethical Response Cycle method has culminated in a synthesis of the thinking processes involved in ethical social re-constructivist discourse, dialectic, and dialogue, which we have called ethical dialectical discourse. The authors needed to adapt their working habits to devise a workable and useable software program and, in so doing, they devised a methodology that has the potential to facilitate social and professional transformations. The second author, a technology developer, was challenged by the demands of embedding the complex and grey (as opposed to black and white) thinking that ethical discourse involves into a software program. The first author, an academic, was challenged by the demands of adapting her accustomed pedagogy and theoretical approach to an ICT platform. However, we concluded that it is possible to do both. The result was warmly and enthusiastically received by the participants who reported learning a lot, being challenged, and having fun! Leadership emerged in some participants who left the project with a new zeal to engage with both ethics and ICTs. The potential for the ZTLS and Working Wisely to embed ethical professionalism into daily practice is exciting and potentially transformative.

Similar approaches could be applied in any corporate, government, or community setting where the issues are complex with many competing cultural interests or where rational decision-making models have proved cumbersome or ineffective. This approach is an important bridge between the tacit or common-sense knowledge usually found in workplace settings among both skilled and unskilled workers and the scientific or theoretical knowledge of professionals and academics. Important to users, the approach is unthreatening, flexible, sustainable, and replicable. It allows professionals to take ownership of their professional development and knowledge creation needs as they practise professional autonomy in communities of practice to explore and resolve “real” and situated issues, rather than engage in remote and theoretical staff development exercises. This allows people to value and articulate their own professionalism and transform their practice.

References


