Creating an Inclusive Space for Research Conversations: A critical reflection

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Abstract

Within and across university departments, research seems to be much less discussed among colleagues – beyond small, existing coteries – during the conceptualisation and planning stages than showcased when already complete. Hierarchies, silos and lack of opportunities to engage may exclude individuals from potentially valuable research conversations, depending on status, contract type or access to existing research groups. Indeed, conversations about research across different, specialised interests seem to have decreased since the pandemic, hindering the development of new interdisciplinary relationships.

The project referred to in this critical reflection sought to foster inclusive conversations about envisioned or ongoing research through activities engaging contract researchers, professional services staff, research students and academic staff across levels. Using peer-coaching guidelines and question prompts, the project team, comprising members in diverse roles and career stages, co-created empathic, non-judgmental and non-hierarchical conversation formats and trialled these with 24 participants across different roles and career stages at a departmental event.

In this paper, we critically reflect on this attempt to create an innovative inclusive space for research conversations, explaining how the project team dealt with the challenges of silos and hierarchies and highlighting some of the tensions and difficulties involved in creating such a space. Reflective writing, discussions and survey questionnaires distributed during the project showed that intentional groupings and guided interactions did, to some extent at least, counter structural barriers in the service of an inclusive research culture, fostering mutual respect and support while encouraging research reflection.

Keywords: research conversation; EDI; inclusion; interdisciplinarity; peer-coaching; inclusive research culture

Introduction

The academic landscape tends to be characterised by structured hierarchies and silos that create barriers to wider conversations about research, particularly in the early stages of a project's development (**Olkanen, 2020**). In our experience, research-focused conversations, if they occur at all, generally relate to post-completion work, leaving formative dialogues unsupported. Accessibility is often determined by status in a hierarchy, excluding early-career researchers, postdoctoral fellows, teaching-focused and professional services staff and those on short-term contracts, and this poses a challenge to idea development and collaborative potential (**Roper, 2024**). Studies show, for example, that professional services staff face inequity of treatment (**Holmes, 2020**; **Pilgrim-Brown, 2024**), where they are alienated from research contexts overall, whereas they could be seen as research enablers (**Briody et al., 2021**). Watermeyer and Olssen (**2016**) also discuss equality, diversity and inclusion challenges in academia, arguing that contemporary research evaluation mechanisms can alienate researchers from their own institutions, particularly when performance metrics override collaboration and inclusive practices. When research is narrowly defined by externally imposed indicators, opportunities for collaborative knowledge creation and participatory dialogue shrink — especially for staff on fixed-term or teaching-only contracts, who are often structurally excluded from such evaluations (**Ibid**).

Past initiatives to enhance research collaboration, however, have mostly relied on top-down approaches to organising discussions according to pre-determined disciplinary or interdisciplinary themes (**Siedlok et al., 2015**) or *about* research culture while not necessarily actively enabling its development (**Wellcome Trust, n.d.**). These approaches tend to rely on the organisers' judgements about which participants will be potentially interested and, as a result, to whom invitations will be sent. People brought into discussion are usually those who are already established in related fields and who directly work on the selected theme, but this can exclude those whose work is not of obvious relevance, even though they may have an interest in discussion and insights to share (**Siedlok and Hibbert, 2014**). This could involve, for example, professional services staff, teaching-focused staff and academic researchers whose work does not already bear an explicit relation to the themes. Such exclusion reinforces existing silos and hierarchies and hinders the development of unpredictable, innovative connections between people's work (**Efemini et al., 2024**). There are also few guidelines available about how to facilitate meaningful research conversations (as opposed to assuming that meaningful conversations will occur simply by placing people in the same space).

In response to these perceived gaps, a Research Conversations project we have been involved in has been exploring the value and importance of creating spaces for and facilitating research-in-progress conversations (see Acknowledgments for more details). In this short article, we critically reflect on the project's initial attempts to address the challenges of silos and hierarchies via creation of an innovative, inclusive space for guided peer-to-peer research conversations.

Project Design: Process and Challenges

The project began with an attempt to see if the above starting assumptions about the need for more, and more inclusive, research conversations were shared within a larger group from a particular Social Sciences department in a UK university. Within the context of a questionnaire designed for this purpose – and of the project as a whole – research conversations (henceforth, 'RCs') were defined as 'relatively casual conversations about or relating to research, occurring (spontaneously) in informal settings'. All staff and research student members of the department concerned were surveyed. Forty-one questionnaires were completed, from a total staff and student population of 128. All but one of the respondents considered RCs to be extremely, very or fairly important as a contribution to positive research culture within a department, and 23 (56%) wanted to have RCs quite often or very frequently. However, 29 (71%) said they rarely or only sometimes had such conversations. A full report of the findings can be found in Supplemental File 1.[i]

In line with the questionnaire results, the project team considered its major tasks to be the development and evaluation of resources that can facilitate RCs. Instead of starting from scratch, the team drew on and adapted existing resources from a successful previous initiative for the Warwick International Higher Education Academy (WIHEA) which had been co-led by the principal investigator (**WIHEA, 2023**). These resources included an activity format, guidelines and prompt questions for peer dialogue about teaching that promote active listening and non-hierarchical relations.

Guided empathic, non-hierarchical interaction and reflection in peer-coaching dyads lie at the heart of the approach developed in this previous project, and it is this form of compassionate/collaborative interaction which was felt to be extendable to research-related conversations in the Research Conversations project. Besides peer dialogue resources, a quick-fire group Q&A game was also created as an additional RC activity.

The biggest challenge in developing the RC resources was ensuring inclusivity and relatability of the RC resources and thereby creating an inclusive conversational space that would value all higher education

professionals' expertise and invite everyone's voices and contributions. We wanted to ensure that anyone could engage with the resources and participate in conversations equally easily, regardless of their professional role, status, and career stage. The team appreciated that all higher education professionals, not just academic researchers, engage in and around research in one way or another. We therefore defined 'research' in a broad sense to include practitioner research and inquiry, and data analysis as well as academic research support done by professional staff. The team assumed that all higher education professionals can play a role in a culture of research collaboration and potentially have an interest in participating in conversations about research.

One key measure for dealing with the challenge of self-perceived lack of qualification to talk about research was to ensure inclusivity of project team composition, from the outset, by getting various roles and stages represented within the project team. The PI therefore invited departmental colleagues from various statuses, roles and career stages to join. Team members included research and teaching focused staff, teaching-focused staff, professional services staff, a fixed-term contract research fellow, and junior and senior PhD students.

The team deployed their diverse perspectives and expertise to develop and then trial the activity resources via two cycles of paired dialogues among team members and revising them based on whole-team reflective discussion. All members were asked to reflect on and evaluate the usefulness and relatability of the RC resources from the perspective of their own professional role and career status. At whole-team meetings, feedback was invited from all team members, generating discussions where improvements were made to the activities.

Research Conversation Activities

Within our project team and over the course of five team meetings, we developed and piloted guidelines/formats for two types of structured peer dialogue about research:

- Structured peer dialogue guidelines and prompt questions (see Supplemental File 2)
- Group Q&A card game (see Supplemental File 3)

We implemented and evaluated these activities at a June 2024 'Research Conversations' event for 24 participants from the same Social Sciences department. Including 12 research/research-teaching/teaching focussed staff, 2 professional services staff, and 10 research students. An overview of the programme for the event can be seen in **Table 1** (further detail has been provided in Supplemental File 4).

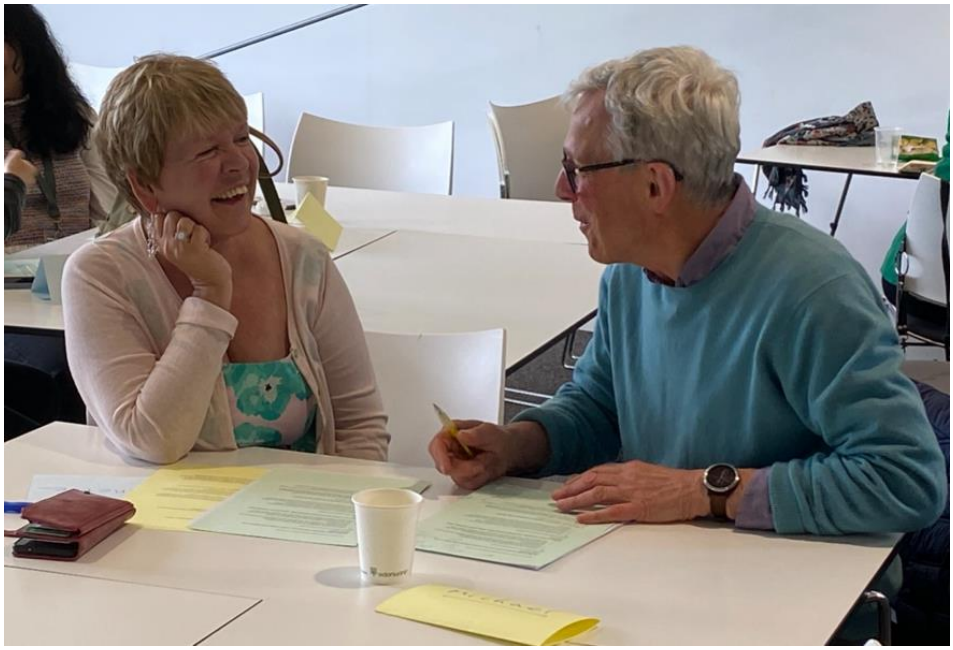
Table 1: Overview of event programme

Schedule	Activities
10:00	Introduction (including presentation of survey results and initial discussion)
10:45	Activity #1: Peer dialogue in pairs (and tea/coffee)
11:45	Activity #2: Peer dialogue in pairs
12:35	Lunch
13:35	Activity #3: Group Q&A game
14:45	Reflective writing (and team/coffee)
15:15	Evaluative discussion of activities
16:00	End

Peer dialogue

At the event, every participant was paired up twice, conducting a structured peer dialogue (**Figure 1**) with two different people. Each conversation was allotted around 40 minutes, with each partner taking an extended turn (20 minutes each) to talk about and be questioned about their involvement in and/or attitudes towards research. This activity was inspired by previous dialogues on teaching within WIHEA (**WIHEA PRHELC, 2023**).

Figure 1: Two participants in a structured peer dialogue about research. (Author image, participant permission granted).



To achieve the goal of countering silos and hierarchies, two aspects were believed to be key in organising peer dialogues. The first was cross-silo matching, namely, organising peer dialogue between participants from different professional roles (i.e., postgraduate research (PGR) student, professional service staff, teaching-focused staff and teaching- and research-focused staff). In the second conversation, we focused on the second aspect – that is, cross-hierarchy matching, between participants in the same professional role but at different career stages (e.g., 1st year PhD

and 3rd year PhD, or new staff member and senior staff member). In order to realise inter-role and inter-status matching, the project team had aimed for a balanced number of staff and students during the participant recruitment stage. To achieve this balance, the team considered it crucial to diversify event promotion methods by reaching out to different professional groups. It was expected that it would be more difficult to recruit staff members than PGRs, so the team sent not only centralised email and calendar invitations to all staff and students in the department, but also personalised ones to individual staff members. It was also anticipated that some teaching-focused and professional staff might not consider a 'research' event relevant to them, hence the project team additionally took a bottom-up approach by introducing the event and clarifying potential misunderstandings to colleagues of team members. Furthermore, at the event, in order to realise inter-role and inter-status matching, the team collected name badges from participants and intentionally paired them up across roles and different statuses with people with whom they were thought to rarely meet and talk.

The other important aspect was actively modelling empathetic non-hierarchical conversations. Before the peer dialogues, the team firstly asked participants to read conversation guidelines which explicitly highlighted the importance of the following: 'rapport, 'speak extensively', 'listen attentively', 'ask questions', 'reflect afterwards', 'respect confidentiality'. For the peer dialogue, participants were asked to go through the following three superordinate prompt questions, each accompanied by possible sub-questions, encouraging participants to share personal understanding and stories around research:

1. What does research mean for you, in your role/current status in the department?
2. What is your motivation for being involved with, doing and/or learning about research?
3. What do you aspire to in relation to research in the future?

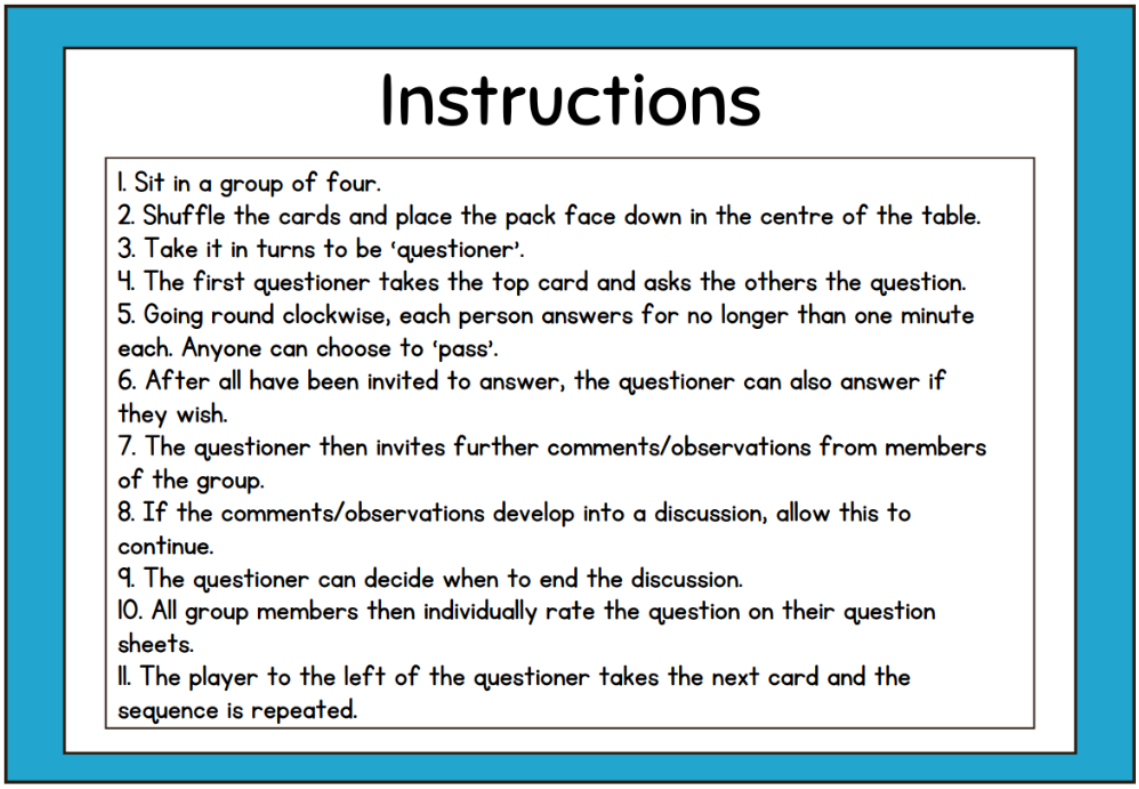
Research conversation group game

As in the peer dialogue, cross-role and cross-status mixing was also an important factor in the way the team formed groups for the game activity. This was a quick-fire conversational Q&A game designed to bring people from different stages and statuses together to share their views and experiences around the same issues. Around four people (e.g., a professor, a junior teaching-focused lecturer, a professional services staff member and a PGR student) were put together to form one group.

A deck of 30 question cards (see **Figure 2** for the first six of these) and a set of game rule instructions (see **Figure 3**) were provided to each group. Every group was expected to have several rounds of discussion. Group members took turns to pick a card randomly and to take the role of a questioner who would facilitate a group discussion about the question. Similarly to the peer dialogues, questions were designed to move participants beyond everyday transactional conversations and into expression of feelings and recounting of personal stories. In addition to there being personally oriented questions, the game format was designed to facilitate conversations of a relatively relaxing and playful nature, whereby participants could open themselves up to others.

Figure 2: Sample cards for the research conversations 'game'.

Figure 3: Instructions for the group research conversations game.



On the one hand, the game was intended to provide a casual and safe space for participants to share their personal stories relating to their professional roles and status, thereby enhancing attention to voices and stories that would usually be marginalised and invisible. The game also permitted participants to juxtapose and learn about different perspectives on the same issues and better understand other professional roles in the institutional ecology. Overall, it was intended to enable participants to discover connections and commonalities regarding shared challenges as well as aspirations (**Figure 4**).

Figure 4: One group playing the research conversation game.
(Author image, participant permission granted).

Critical Reflection

End-of-event reflective writing and discussion, as well as a follow-up survey, indicated that intentional grouping and guiding of participants to converse across role and status boundaries had effectively countered barriers to inclusive research culture and enabled discoveries of common ground in the area of research.[ii]

New affective connections and feelings of mutual respect and support were fostered, while, at the same time, the designed activities enabled useful reflection on one's own research and career development. This was the case for professional services staff as much as for other participants. One of the professional staff participants positioned themselves as being *'currently outside of the research bubble'* (**Participant A comments**), but they added that

> *…it is helpful to listen to experienced researchers at different points in their journey and to articulate my own thoughts in relation to possible future research*. (**Participant A comments**)

According to feedback, non-hierarchical, peer-to-peer conversations, emphasising empathy, non-judgmental engagement, and inclusivity seem to have been achieved overall at the event. The majority of participants judged the conversations useful and, as one participant said, they:

> *…helped me vocalise a lot of things about my research intentions. Talking to a peer [in the structured peer dialogue activity] gave me some new ideas about my research.* (**Participant B comments**).

However, as we critically reflected after the project day with reference to recorded discussion and evaluative writing elicited from participants, three issues for further discussion and investigation have emerged. Below, we have firstly conveyed and discussed our perception that verbal behaviour specifically within the structured peer dialogues may have been shaped according to an individual's position and sense of belonging within the academic hierarchy. Secondly, we reflect on the value of peer-coaching as a key format for these conversations, since this format encourages reciprocity, fostering a sense of mutual investment in each other's success. Thirdly, we recognise and address differing motivations for participant engagement and project intentions.

Hierarchy in structured peer dialogues: A shifting dynamic according to status of interlocutors?

The project aims to promote meaningful conversations across different levels of the academic community. In pairing across these levels, we not only sought to counter traditional academic barriers to research, but also to provide a unique platform for building trust and the co-creation of

knowledge, facilitating mutual learning and support. However, a theme in some participant feedback concerned the challenge of accommodating the project's non-hierarchical principles with deep-rooted academic norms. In evaluative writing after the peer dialogue activities, some of the participants mentioned that they perceived a shift in the dynamics of conversation depending on the status of the individual that they were in conversation with. For example:

> *In the second peer dialogue, I was paired with a senior colleague who I greatly enjoyed talking to; we actually did not follow the prompts closely, but still focused on the topic of research. In my case, my own PhD project, I found this conversation extremely useful and exciting. We did not want to stop talking even when the time was up. I realised that it sometimes might be important who you talk to [to] find the conversation fruitful, even if structured in a particular way.* (**Participant C comments**).

> *The two conversations I had were completely different, and I am not sure whether it was the way the dialogue was approached by us or the interlocutors themselves. However, this is only in terms of connection and personal enjoyment; information exchange and the quality of discussion was good. In both cases, I was felt a bit intense in the first chat, trying to follow the prompts closely and trying to make my PGR colleague comfortable. In the second peer dialogue, I didn't need to do that as connections happen naturally.* (**Participant D comments**).

Differences in the nature of the research conversations engaged in may then relate to the relative status of participants. In traditional academic settings, power dynamics often shape interactions, with less experienced researchers deferring to senior colleagues, and ideas from early-career researchers being overshadowed by those of more established scholars (**Papatsiba & Cohen, 2020**). Overall, while the non-hierarchical structure of the RCs enabled participants to develop a sense of belonging and community, assertions of power within pairs or groups may, at the same time, need to be further investigated and mitigated. We aim to research this further by inviting self-recording of some dialogues in the current extension of the project.

Structure of guided peer dialogues

With the aim of helping to bring down barriers and facilitate more inclusive and open dialogue, participants engaged in structured dialogues. Our project also adopted the principles of peer-to-peer coaching, where participants from all stages of their careers come together as equals.

Peer coaching shifts the focus away from hierarchical mentoring, which is often one-directional, to a more collaborative and equitable exchange of ideas (**Parker et al., 2015**). This goal seems to have been achieved, as one of the participants mentioned:

> *In my conversation with the PGR colleague, I felt we did not connect immediately, but this was resolved as we continued going through the prompts and the question[s] provided [... – these] were quite helpful as they guided us.* (**Participant E comments**).

However, different dyads used the opportunity in different ways, showing agency:

> *We did not use the questions in the order provided, but just picked up the ones we felt were the most relevant to our talk. Despite [having an] active conversation supported by the prompts, it felt like we were a bit constrained in the focus of our conversation.'* (**Participant F comments**).

> *We didn't use the [questions], but generally followed the guidelines because my partner and I were very talkative. We just start straight away with our stories.* (**Participant G comments**).

> *The guiding questions led the conversation going and sometimes we didn't address the questions.* (**Participant H comments**).

Although our intention was actually to respect participants' autonomy and agency to engage in the activities as they saw fit, reflecting on the structured dialogues we think that there might have been some who felt forced to hold their conversation in a certain way. For example:

> *I think the guidelines are a bit lengthy and wordy though even I understand they are made for good intentions. I wish the handouts could be clearer and shorter, with bigger fonts in printing.* (**Participant I comments**).

Overall, while the structured peer dialogue format showed the power of peer-to-peer engagement, empathy, and non-hierarchical dialogue in creating a more equitable and vibrant research environment, evaluative feedback showed that participants' autonomy and own creativity may need to be better accounted for:

> *Overall, I found the guidance and question prompts relevant to the conversational context. They were useful in creating meaningful interactions and connections, although the most enjoyable bit was the unstructured part in the beginning and in the end. Therefore, I would like to suggest developing strategies of facilitating less-structured chats.* (**Participant J comments**).

Relationship between our agenda and the participants' motivations/perceptions

The above led us back to thinking about our intentions and whether these reflected participants' own motivations to engage or not engage in particular kinds of RCs.

In the initial questionnaire we had circulated within the department (with 41 responses), one question asked about participants' primary motivation for participating in RCs. Looking back to the questionnaire answers, we remembered that: *'Interest and curiosity about research'* (11 responses) as well as *'Inspiration and expansion of perspectives'* (10 responses) were the highest-scoring motivations, whereas some were participating with the intentions of *'knowledge exchange'* (6 responses) and *'networking'* (4 responses).

In terms of the topics that participants said they would like to discuss when engaging in RCs in the department, the answers to a different question revealed diverse interests, as shown below:

- Possibilities of collaboration (29 responses)
- Emerging research trends (28 responses)
- Challenges and obstacles in research (27 responses)
- Research focus (26 responses)
- Methodologies and research techniques (25 responses)
- Research findings (25 responses)
- Bids for funding (20 responses)

Reflecting on the way we had organised the activities, we became even more aware of the complexity of organising such an event. The ultimate goal was to create a space where the status of an individual does not determine the value of their contribution, and where early ideas and contributions can be nurtured, critiqued, and supported without fear of judgment. However, in line with the insight discussed above that hierarchies cannot be ignored, some participants mentioned that they had benefitted from *'coming in contact with senior member of staff'* through these RCs. And, as one senior member of staff said in their reflective writing*, 'many of our PGs feel they don't necessarily get enough opportunities to talk to members of staff'* (**Participant K comments**).

By including voices that are often marginalised or excluded from formal academic discussions, these conversations offered a platform for underrepresented researchers and professional services staff to share their insights and experiences. Early-career researchers benefited from

the opportunity to articulate their ideas, receive constructive feedback, and build confidence in their intellectual contributions:

> *I had an extremely useful conversation with my partner. I introduced my project and was asked a series of questions. Introducing my project made me have a better idea of what I'm doing.* (**Participant L comments**).

The follow-up evaluation questionnaire showed that all participants agreed that the research conversations event had helped with self-reflection but quite a few reported that they did not particularly get any new ideas. This did not counteract our aim, but it did clarify better in our own minds – and enables us to assert – that research conversations should be seen as an aim in themselves rather than simply as a prelude, for example to large research grant proposals.

Conclusion

As participant feedback showed, the research conversation activities developed within the project offered a platform for collective knowledge-building, co-creation of ideas, and refinement of opinions and beliefs in real-time. We believe that the importance of these kinds of conversation extends beyond simply providing feedback on ongoing research. They are vital for creating a culture of collaboration and intellectual curiosity. When researchers engage in conversations about their work-in-progress, they open themselves to new perspectives, allowing for critical reflections that can challenge assumptions, refine methodologies, and introduce interdisciplinary approaches. Reflective writing elicited during the event itself illustrates that the project provided the *'[...] opportunity to, to break down [...] barriers and, and give people [...] opportunities'* (**Participant M comments**). The excerpt below illustrates and encapsulates well how participants found the project activities very inspiring:

> *'I think one of the key things about research in a university is that it's very hard to do because there are so many other things and other pressure on you. So almost the one advantage of days like today is it's sort of inspirational enthusiasm that you generate in these discussions because there are so many things that are sort of discouraging you to do research that it's nice to get the reinforcement of a day like today where you can go away thinking, ah, yes, I have left that on the back burner too long. I need to re-look at that piece of research. Or I have had problems that I discussed with other people and I now see a way forward. So, in a way what I think is the most advantageous thing about these sorts of meetings is the fact that they are inspiring us all to realise how much we like doing it.'* (**Participant N comments**).

Moving forward, however, the project team is not complacent, and we recognise that, while we wish to continue to explore and implement RCs, it is necessary for us to continue to ensure that all voices are heard, all ideas are valued, and all participants in events like these have the opportunity to contribute to the co-creation of knowledge. We now aim to explore how interdisciplinarity and inclusion can be further achieved via structured communication activities, with a renewed emphasis on mitigating power dynamics within the further RC events we aim to organise.

Acknowledgements

The project reflected upon here was titled 'Countering silos and hierarchies through peer-to-peer research-in-progress conversations' and ran from April to July 2024. The team members were: Ayten Alibaba, Joana Almeida, Miriam Schwiening, Richard Smith (PI), Lila Tennent and Yvette Yitong Wang.

The project – and an ongoing Phase Two extension (October 2024–July 2025) with the same title – was funded by the University of Warwick Enhancing Research Culture fund.

More information about the project, as well as all the supplement materials mentioned in the article, can be found online.[iii]

We would also like to express our gratitude to the individuals featured in the photographs for permitting us to capture and use their images in this article.

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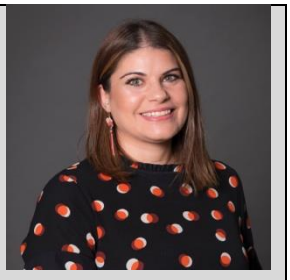

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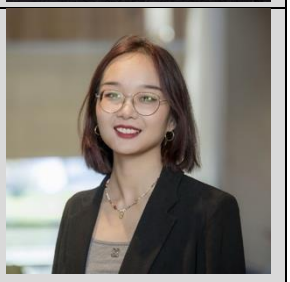

Yvette Yitong Wang is a PhD candidate in Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick. Her PhD project looks into the interpretative and transformative aspects of education and investigates the way in which teachers learn to deal with these aspects in intercultural language teaching and learning. Her research takes an interdisciplinary approach, integrating perspectives from applied linguistics, education, philosophy, and social psychology in her conceptualisation of interculturality, language, and teacher development. She has participated in designing and organising interdisciplinary events, including the Warwick Festival of Doctoral Research, a research method workshop on interdisciplinarity, research culture projects, and teaching-assistant development workshops.

List of Images

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Endnotes

[i] Editors' note: The supplementary files for this article can be accessed on its online landing page (https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v12i3.1858) or via the authors.

[ii] *Research Conversations Away Day: Follow Up Evaluation Questionnaire* (2024) results available at: https://warwick.ac.uk/research/research-culture-at-warwick/counteringsilos/report_on_the_followup_evaluation_quesitonnaire.pdf [Accessed: 6 August 2025].

[iii] Available at: https://warwick.ac.uk/researchconversations [Accessed: 6 August 2025].