# Teaching / Learning Centers: The impact of on-site sustained collaboration for ESL / bilingual teachers' professional development [1] [2]

SANDRA I. MUSANTI, DOCTORAL CANDIDATE, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, USA

**Abstract:** This study focuses on an on site professional development program that used an innovative model of creating Teaching / Learning Centers (TLC) in five elementary school second grade classrooms taught by teams of experienced bilingual or English as a second language (ESL) endorsed teachers. These teaching teams promoted school-wide collegial conversations and collaborative learning and teaching to help peer teachers meet the language needs of diverse students. The study explores the advantages of collaboratively working with peers and the power of collegial conversations as a source for teacher development. In addition, the study suggests that peer collaboration and reflective practices such as reflective writing require learning in order to become effective strategies to further teacher knowledge construction.

## Introduction

During the past decade, the discourse in teacher education has included collaboration as a strategic, sometimes essential, component of any promising teacher development approach. Primarily, collaboration among teachers has become a means to overcome isolation and a central part of any reflective teacher development program. Besides furthering the integration of reflection about practice, "shared critique and supported change" (Clark et al 1996, p. 196), teacher collaboration also promotes joint work and the construction of shared visions and values through trusting relationships (John-Steiner, Weber & Minnis 1998). Although there is a broad range of research on the impact of collaboration on professional development for novice teachers, less is known about collaborative experiences for practicing teachers, especially in the area of multicultural education and bilingual / ESL (English as a second language) education. This article examines the implications of creating a learning environment (Teaching / Learning Centers) to foster collaborative teacher interactions with the goal of constructing a new multicultural pedagogical approach to teaching bilingual / ESL learners. The study is part of broader, ongoing research that explores current in-service teachers' interpretations of knowledge, identity and practice as they participate in sustained on-site collaborative professional develop-

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ment. This article presents preliminary findings on these themes from teachers' oral and written narratives to understand the nature of their collaboration and its impact on teachers' knowledge.

**The Teaching / Learning Centers (TLC)**

In the summer of 2000, a local public school district and a southwestern university in the United States initiated a broad project for Educating Linguistically Diverse Students (ELDS). The main goal of the ELDS Project was to improve the education of limited English proficiency (LEP) students by transforming teacher education and practice. It responded to the national and local shortage of ESL / bilingual-endorsed teachers and to a local school district's limited requirement for LEP professional development which consisted primarily of 32 hours of video-based training.

One of the initiatives of the ELDS project was the Teaching / Learning Centers (TLC). Five centers were created in which participating teachers developed an in-service curriculum in their schools for enhancing staff knowledge about the needs of LEP students. The TLC was an ongoing, school-based, peer-directed professional development program. At each school site, a team of two teachers (co-facilitators) holding ESL and/or bilingual endorsements shared responsibility for teaching one class (second grade), promoted a range of on-site professional development opportunities for colleagues (guest teachers), and participated in a biweekly seminar jointly coordinated by one university faculty member and two instructors from the school district.

The purposes of the TLC were to:

- Help teachers become more proficient in teaching second-language learners
- Help teachers maximize opportunities to develop all students' competence in speech and literacy—in the students' first languages and in others to which they are exposed.
- Provide teachers the time, structure, and collegial support for sustained joint work and conversations about their teaching practice.
- Extend the teaching/learning approach to the whole school community.

The TLC project was initiated in five linguistically and culturally diverse second grade classrooms at five elementary schools. Each TLC classroom had a different approach to teaching ESL students depending on the students' demographics. Three TLC classrooms were bilingual second grades developing a dual immersion language program. Two TLC classrooms had a broad diversity of ESL students implementing a sheltered English instruction model. Both co-facilitators in each team were

ESL-endorsed teachers. four TLC classrooms had at least one bilingual-endorsed teacher.

Guest teachers at each school site voluntarily visited the TLC classroom throughout the year. Typically these were teachers interested in learning about ESL or bilingual instruction. The visits involved a week of co-planning with the co-facilitators, observing ESL lessons, team teaching with one co-facilitator in the TLC classroom, and meeting to debrief on their teaching or on ESL / bilingual instruction.

Each TLC co-facilitator had to attend mandatory biweekly seminars intended to provide support for the coordination and organization of the TLC classroom, and to enhance co-facilitators knowledge about ESL / bilingual instruction. During the seminars, co-facilitators guided by the TLC coordinators jointly reflected on the TLC's vision and goals, the methodology implemented to launch the TLC at each school site, the guest teachers' visits, co-facilitators' collaboration with teammates, and specific themes related to ESL / bilingual instruction, among other activities. The goal of the TLC project was to cultivate collaborative interaction among teachers at each school; in addition, it helped to shape the quality of instruction for English language learners through the creation of a collegial support system. Each year, all five teams of co-facilitators collaborated with approximately 7 to 10 guest teachers at each school site.

**Methodology**

This study takes an interpretative and qualitative research approach since the main purpose is to interpret the TLC co facilitators' voices as documented through their oral and written narratives. As Merriam (1998) notes: "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 6). This study includes a narrative inquiry approach to teachers' stories and voices. As Clandinin & Connelly (2000) have noted: "for us, life--as we come to it and it comes to others—is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities" (p. 17). For the purpose of this study, narratives are the oral or written 'texts' teachers construct to express their stories, beliefs, ideas, reflections, doubts and questions about what they know and who they are as teachers.

This article focuses on data collected during the first year of the TLC Project. Participants included eight co-facilitators who participated in the project from beginning to end (two years). Three co-facilitators dropped the TLC after the first year and, consequently, a new team of three co-facilitators joined the project for the second year. Data sources analyzed

were the following: (1) The co-facilitators' end-of-semester reflective papers (two papers for each participant, one from January, 2001 and one from June, 2001), (2) field notes from the researcher's observations of the seminar sessions, and (3) the co-facilitators' anonymous responses to the TLC Project end-of-the-year evaluation survey.

Data analysis has been approached from a qualitative perspective, including thematic coding as well as constant comparative analysis (Merriam 1998). Analysis involves data interpretation (Denzin 1994) and elements of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly 2000) as teachers' oral and written narratives are explored to understand co-facilitators' collaboration and its impact on co-facilitators' development and professional knowledge.

Findings are limited as this study analyzes data from a small sample (eight co-facilitators); and are preliminary, as the analysis is restricted to data collected during the first year of the project. Therefore, findings are not suitable for generalizability. This study is part of an ongoing research; therefore the findings will be enriched as the investigation progresses with the integration of other data sources and further triangulation of the researcher's interpretations.

**Findings**

Learning about collaboration

Peer collaboration was a central feature of the TLC project as a professional development strategy to change teachers' practices to improve the education of LEP students. Issues of collaboration became a recurrent topic of conversation among the co-facilitators and project coordinators during the seminars. The vision and goals of the TLC were also conversation topics that continued throughout the year (14 occurrences in 20 seminar meetings). These conversations resulted in a document jointly developed by the co-facilitators and TLC coordinators that identified the TLC emphasis on collaboration. The document, "Building a collegial school community for the effective language and literacy instruction of first and second language learners" (September, 2000), refers to collaboration as teachers teaching and learning together to create a school wide, inclusive community of learners as a means to facilitate and improve the education of English as a Second Language students.

The co-facilitators' participation in the TLC involved the construction of a variety of professional partnerships. At their school site, they collaborated with team-partners and guest teachers visiting their classrooms. During the seminars, they established collaborative relationships with the rest of the TLC co-facilitators and coordinators. Each semester they were asked to write a reflective paper on their collaboration and learning process. In these papers, they defined collaboration as peer in-

teraction, peer dialogue, peer feedback, listening to one another, sharing experiences and ideas, "a team partner to laugh and cry with"(Alice, January, 2001), and an opportunity to learn from one another. It seems that co-facilitators perceived collaboration as a means to overcome isolation and, to a lesser extent, as a way to collectively construct knowledge. Co-facilitators valued collaboration because it allowed them to overcome classroom isolation by exchanging experiences, maintaining interesting conversations and building relationships with peers. The co-facilitators' reflections confirmed that "successful collaboration involves increasing our understanding of one another's worlds and roles through shared dialogue" (Clark et al 1996, p. 227). In addition, the TLC provided a collegial and joint task that became the context and reason for shared dialogue among participants. As John-Steiner et al (1998) observed, sustained dialogue is not enough for genuine collaboration; a shared commitment, a complementarity of skills and roles, together with a joint task, are also necessary.

TLC collaboration involved co-facilitators opening the doors of their classrooms and their thinking to 'others' (team partners, guest teachers or other TLC participants), which can be "a source of anxiety and stress, because of the disruption it can create in the involved classrooms" (Christy, Reflective Paper, January 2001). Initially, breaking down the barriers to the privacy of their teaching was challenging and intimidating. Christy's words reflect many of the seminar participant's conversations about this topic: "I was always anxious when the guest teacher would observe me teaching or when I would serve as the primary teacher in the guest teacher's classroom." In addition, co-facilitators emphasized the time and effort involved in becoming comfortable with their new role in the TLC. Reflecting back on her personal progress toward meeting co-facilitator expectations, Laura explains: "it is difficult to find enough time to discuss observations from the classroom and have philosophical discussions too. Both of these discussions are essential to the process" (Reflective Paper, January, 2001). Most co-facilitators pointed out that trust was an essential component if they were expected to reach genuine collaboration. For Sonya, one of the outcomes of the first year experience with the TLC was "the relationship of trust that was built with my co-facilitator [referring to her classroom partner]" (Reflective Paper, August, 2001).

For this group of co-facilitators, collaboration required a learning process that included different strategies. Some of these strategies were: long seminar conversations, team debriefing moments, requests for help when things were getting difficult with partners or guest teachers, readings selected by the TLC coordinators to support this process, and different personal strategies to cope with the challenge of learning to work and talk with peer teachers in different situations. Typically, the

co-facilitators' conversations pointed to the complexity of collaboration, its challenges, the skills needed and the impact it might have in terms of knowledge construction. Julie's writing aptly summarizes the co-facilitators' talk on collaboration:

> Collaboration is an art in itself and I felt like it required a whole process of learning new skills on my part. The main issue for me centered on how to integrate ideas that I wanted to try, or felt would work, with the ideas of my peers so that the finished work was truly a collaborative effort. I found that our best work with each other and guest teachers involved the input of everyone involved. ...This is something teachers have to learn how to do, but when working with a peer, we have to learn to collaborate, which in my mind is a new way of looking at teaching. The need to listen to [one] another and integrate someone else's ideas is a neglected, but important part of teaching (Reflective Paper, June, 2001)

Peer dialogue as a source for knowledge and development

In accordance with research findings on teacher talk (Rust & Orland 2001), co-facilitators mostly talked about themselves and their work, especially their teamwork with guest teachers visiting the TLC classrooms. Research has shown the relevance of peer dialogue and professional conversations for teacher learning (Bruffee 1999, Cavazos & the Members of WEST 2001, Clark et al 1996, Clark & Florio-Ruane 2001, Rust & Orland 2001)."Conversation–direct, indirect, or internalized—makes even solitary tasks into collaborative ones. Once we begin to use speech instrumentally, we work together, whether we work together or apart" (Bruffee 1999, p. 139). Co-facilitators seemed to value collective conversations during the seminars, and they also valued talking to guest teachers and team partners at the school site. They recognized peer dialogue as a source for learning and development. As Mary reflects:

> I think ... I would never have got that if I was teaching by myself in a classroom ...bouncing ideas off ...one another and ...having some kind of support system where you can go and say: "This isn't working"; and "What do you think of doing this?" or just getting ideas from the things that we've read as a group. It has been very beneficial (Mary, Interview Transcript).

At the end of the year, in an anonymous survey the co-facilitators identified examples of personal areas of professional development. A thematic analysis showed that 41% of their responses were examples of development on peer collaboration skills, team building, and professional conversations. The rest of the responses were distributed among different topics related to pedagogical knowledge and ESL and bilingual instruction (See Appendix). During its first year, the TLC professional development outcomes concentrated more on issues of collaboration and peer interactions than on literacy instruction for ESL students. Laura

reflects on the relevance of peer dialogue and the possible impact on students' learning: "On a school-wide level the TLC opened a new level of dialogue for me with the teachers who participated in the TLC classroom exchanges. ... This sustained professional dialogue will benefit our students, parents, and all of us participating in the TLC.." (Reflective Paper, June, 2001). Although co-facilitators' responses showed that peer collaboration was considered a new area of development, there was not enough evidence to consider to what extent learning to collaborate with peers was connected to individual or collective knowledge construction, especially in the area of ESL / bilingual instruction.

Collaborative learning stresses peer dialogue, negotiated relationships, self-governance and trusting individuals to oversee their own learning process. Collaborative learning has been recognized as an important part of a multicultural approach to teaching (Davidman & Davidman 1994) because it is a strategy that can foster the empowerment of students and teachers from diverse cultural and language backgrounds through self-directed learning. The TLC tried to foster a collaborative approach to learning by structuring seminar sessions through autonomous group work and collegial conversations and by allowing co-facilitators to participate in TLC curricular decisions (e.g. deciding seminar themes, selecting readings, suggesting guest speakers). The TLC project hoped to empower teachers by providing a diverse learning environment and collegial sustained conversations which enabled teachers to widen their comprehension of cultural diversity and to produce effective teaching practices for ESL / bilingual students. The co-facilitators' conversations and reflective papers clearly revealed teachers' willingness to engage in professional dialogues and to further their knowledge of multicultural education and second language learners' instruction. Further exploration is needed to understand the extent to which peer-collaboration impacted their knowledge to develop a culturally responsive instruction.

Teachers' writing vs. teachers' talk

The co-facilitators' willingness to reflect orally on their teaching experiences was clearly revealed in the seminar conversations. Reflection was interpreted as a consequence of peer-dialogue. One co-facilitator explained in her first reflective paper: "we are able to discuss specifics about students and lessons at a much deeper level than if we are just describing our experiences" (Laura, January, 2001). Peer dialogue and reflection are also connected to learning. Another co-facilitator stated that peer conversation "... sets up an atmosphere where we have been able to share ideas and truly learn from one another" (Mary, Reflective Paper, January, 2001).

As willing as co-facilitators were to reflect orally about their practice, they were reluctant to comply with writing assignments such as writing journals and reflective papers. Delays in turning in papers were common, and journal writing was progressively postponed and later completely abandoned. The co-facilitators' resistance and difficulties in writing about their reflections were also evident through the quality of the reflective papers that showed a tendency to be short and more descriptive than analytic. The lack of depth in their written reflections contrasted with the intensity and depth of the seminar dialogue. Co-facilitators' writing, with only two exceptions, focused on describing events or feelings, story telling, stating facts or actions, or attributing value to an experience (Manouchehri 2002), e.g. "this was a memorable experience", "I am thankful for the support system [provided]", " Our classroom with three teachers works amazingly well" (Co-facilitators reflective papers, January, 2001).

Reflection and writing about reflections are complex processes that involve thinking about learning and learning about thinking. Reflection has been recognized as an important element in teacher development, and it has been defined as the possibility to recapture experience and to think about it (Louden 1991, Loughran 1996). Writing is a way to recapture reflections, and it requires learning and scaffolding. The content and quality of co facilitators' writing raise questions about: (a) the instruction and scaffolding they received to develop reflective writing skills, and (b) the connection between reflective thinking, oral reflections and reflective writing, if any.

**Final Reflections**

This study provided several important insights into peer-collaboration for teacher development: 1) Peer dialogue appeared as a central attribute of collaboration. Co facilitators perceived collaborative relationships with colleagues as a way to overcome isolation, and they valued shared dialogue as a means to foster in-depth reflection and to advance their learning. 2) Collaboration was a matter of learning. During the first year of the project, peer collaboration was a prevailing area of teacher development, an area that required teachers to learn to build relationships and to establish dialogue with colleagues. However, the relation between peer dialogue, collaboration and the construction of teacher's knowledge appears problematic. It is not clear whether learning about collaboration was a stage of teacher development to approach a collegial construction of knowledge, or whether it became such a central aspect of the co-facilitators' development that they neglected to focus on the second language learners' education. 3) While embracing reflective dialogue, teachers resisted writing about their reflections. Reflective writing and peer collaboration involve learning and both seem to

be related to the construction of knowledge. The study calls for further exploration of the relationship among teacher talk, teachers' writing and reflective thinking. Although data was inconclusive on the impact of collaboration on teachers' knowledge in multicultural education and ESL / bilingual instruction, the study showed that teachers valued the advantages of collaboratively working with peers and the power of collegial conversations as a potential source for learning.

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## Appendix

### TLC Co-Facilitators Anonymous End-of-the-Year Survey

Frequency of responses to the question: Give two specifics examples of your professional development this year.

| **Collaboration** | | **ESL and Bilingual Instruction** | | **Pedagogical Knowledge** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Themes | # | Themes | # | Themes | # |
| Professional conversations | 6 | Sheltered instruction | 3 | Assessment | 2 |
| Peer collaboration for professional development | 5 | Issues of Second Language Learner Instruction (reading, vocabulary, math, etc.) | 4 | Classroom management | 1 |
| Team building and team teaching | 1 | Bilingual Education | 2 | Teacher as learner | 2 |
| | | | | Literacy instruction | 2 |
| TOTAL | 12 | | 9 | | 7 |