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Collaborative Conversations

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Idiom

Featured Article

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That effective collaboration benefits students (and teachers alike) is affirmed by the well-deserved attention it has received most recently in the professional literature (see, for example, DelliCarpini, 2008, 2009; Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010; NACTAF, 2009; NEA, 2009; Pawan & Ortloff, 2011) and in the TESOL educational community (e.g., themes of 2011 New York State and Kentucky TESOL conferences). Acknowledging the importance of collaborative exchanges among teachers is not a completely novel idea, though. Close to three decades ago, Judith Warren Little (1982) examined the differences between more and less effective schools and found that the more effective ones had a greater degree of collegiality. She noted four unique characteristics of collegiality (or collaboration) in successful schools, where teachers participate in the following activities:

1. Teachers engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practice.
2. Teachers are frequently observed and provided with useful critiques of their teaching.
3. Teachers plan, design, evaluate, and prepare teaching materials together.
4. Teachers teach each other the practice of teaching (pp. 331–332).

Consider what Warren Little's (1982) frequently quoted four key ideas could mean for ELLs in today's schools. What if we translated her seminal findings into a contemporary framework of four Cs, in which collaborative serves as a defining adjective, followed by a key activity or desired teacher behavior necessary for improved student learning?

1. Collaborative Conversations: Through enhanced communication, all teachers have the opportunity to develop ownership and shared responsibility for ELLs' learning.
2. Collaborative Coaching: Through an encouraging school climate and supportive framework, teachers offer and receive feedback on their teaching practices.
3. Collaborative Curriculum Development: Through curriculum mapping and alignment and collaborative materials development, teachers match both their long-term and day-to-day instructional goals and activities.
4. Collaborative Craftsmanship: Through conscious efforts for continuous improvement of the craft of teaching, teachers explore ways to enhance instructional time, language development, and content area resources, and offer support for each other.

Table 1 shows how the concept of collegiality and collaboration may offer a system of support in a linguistically and culturally diverse school context by including the four Cs with ample examples.

Collaborative Conversations	Collaborative Coaching
Talk about ♦ Students' needs ♦ Students' lives ♦ Students in and out of school work ♦ Curriculum and instruction ♦ Teachers' own struggles ♦ Teachers' own successes ♦ What matters to you, the teacher	*Use peer coaching to improve* ♦ Lesson planning ♦ Lesson delivery ♦ Unit design ♦ Use of supplementary materials ♦ Adapted content ♦ Modified instruction ♦ Assessment practices
Collaborative Curriculum Development	**Collaborative Craftsmanship**
Align ♦ Lesson objectives (language objectives and content objectives) ♦ Unit goals ♦ Curriculum maps ♦ Primary and supplementary instructional materials ♦ Adapted texts and materials ♦ Resources	*Explore* ♦ ELLs' background knowledge ♦ ELLs' prior learning ♦ Peer coaching ♦ Planning instruction collaboratively or in the context of co-teaching ♦ Effective methods for aligning curriculum and objectives ♦ Using time more effectively ♦ Making the most of collaborative efforts

Table 1: The Four Cs of Collaboration

Collaboration may start out as a small, grassroots effort, involving only two or three teachers who share the responsibility for some of the same ELLs and are concerned about their students' progress. It may involve an entire grade level. Some examples include grade clusters working together to develop or enhance curricula in elementary schools; an interdisciplinary team of math, science, social studies, English, and ESL teachers (sharing responsibility for a cluster of classes in middle schools); or a discipline-specific department (focusing on preparing all students to meet graduation requirements of high schools). Regardless of the local context, all these collaborative efforts start with professional conversations, through which teachers collaboratively explore their students' needs and responsive practices.

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About the Author

Dr. Andrea Honigsfeld *is associate dean and professor in the Division of Education at Molloy College, Rockville Centre. She is the co-author with Maria Dove of a recently published book,* Collaboration and Co-Teaching: Strategies for English Learners *(Corwin Press, 2010).*

*Sections of this manuscript have grown out of the author's collaborative conversations with Dr. Maria Dove and are featured in their coauthored book, cited above.