From Cooperation to Collaboration: Why Does the Distinction Matter?

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Teacher Development in Perspective

A lot has been said about the beneficial role that cooperation plays in promoting teacher learning, growth, and development in English language teaching. In fact, many of the theories that deal with teachers' professional development focus on cooperation as a way of promoting teacher engagement and growth in the profession (Díaz Maggioli, 2020). However, not all cooperative teacher development activities have yielded the expected beneficial results (Panitz, 1996; Richardson & Díaz Maggioli, 2018). While cooperative thinking and working have contributed to the development of specific projects, they have failed to create a culture of professional development where teachers support one another beyond a concrete project. Hence, I would like to advocate for the advantages of implementing teachers' *collaborative* professional development as a way to bridge the gaps left by cooperative approaches.

In this short article, I will establish a difference between cooperation and collaboration, and provide other related principles of effective professional development that can successfully enhance teacher learning and development.

What Is Cooperation?

According to Panitz (1996), cooperation is a way of structuring interaction among people with the aim of promoting the accomplishment of a specific end-product or goal. In this sense, when people work together, each member of the team is tasked with one aspect of the process that will successfully take the team to achieving the goal or generating the product. In a cooperative scenario, the final product is "thrown together" at the very end by having each member contribute their part to the process. This implies that each team member works without the benefit of input from the rest of the team. While it is definitely an easy way to set up the work of groups, the cooperative mindset has been found to be quite ineffective. Some of the reasons are that it does not foster reciprocity above and beyond the task at hand, and thus, it fails to build a cooperative atmosphere amongst teachers.

If we look at cooperative professional development from the point of view of the thinking it promotes, we see that it promotes a kind of thinking which is linear, logic-based, convergent, and oriented at highlighting individual success in the project. These traits, too, conspire against building a culture of learning, doing, and being that promotes the kind of learning expected of teachers.

Because of the above-mentioned reasons and given what has been learned on effective teachers' professional development from research and school-based practices, it would make more sense to turn toward a philosophy of collaboration. In the next section, I describe such a philosophy.

How Can Collaboration Enhance Teacher Learning?

In contrast with the kind of thinking and doing that is promoted through cooperative learning, collaborative learning provides a philosophy of interaction that brings people together and calls for individuals to be responsible for their actions, with learning included among those actions. Collaborative approaches respect the talents and contributions of each individual member in synergy with one another, thus replicating what true life collaboration looks like.

> ...collaborative work is a form of mediated learning (Díaz Maggioli, 2023) where everyone can contribute their expertise while, at the same time, learning with and from one another.

In collaborative learning, all group participants share the workload, which allows for everyone to provide input to the process. If successful, a collaborative project allows for an easier flow to the process, and also, it allows participants to learn more both as a team and as individuals (Hattie, 2015). This is because collaborative

thinking is recursive, evidence-based, evolving, and more importantly, emerging from the interaction of team members who are working towards a common goal. In this sense, we can say that collaborative work is a form of mediated learning (Díaz Maggioli, 2023) where everyone can contribute their expertise while, at the same time, learning *with* and *from* one another. This kind of learning has the potential to make teachers more autonomous, which is one of the key goals behind professional development.

The Principles of Effective Professional Development

In order to better understand the need for collaborative – as opposed to cooperative – teacher development practices, we should look at what research and practice have indicated are the principles of effective professional development. Richardson and Díaz Maggioli (2018) carried out an extensive meta-analysis of the literature on professional development and also accessed the results of an international survey of teachers, administrators, and policymakers on the subject. By triangulating the findings of both the meta-analysis of research and the data from the survey, they concluded that effective professional development abides by the following principles, which they have organized as the acronym INSPIRE:

> …collaboration helps build
> communities of practitioners who
> collectively take responsibility
> for their students' learning.

I – *Impactful*: Effective professional development is characterized by an improvement in students' learning as a result of teachers honing their teaching skills, knowledge, and dispositions.

N – *Needs-based*: Effective professional development specifically targets the actual learning needs of teachers in particular contexts.

S – *Sustained*: The one-shot professional development day or workshop should give way to learning activities in which teachers engage throughout the academic year in learning more in order to be able to expand their teaching repertoire.

P – *Peer-collaborative*: In order to be truly effective, professional development activities need to recognize the situated expertise of those who teach together in the same context. It is through collaboration that both the teachers and the institution stand a chance of serving learners better.

I – *In practice*: Collaborative professional development is something done in practice and not just through theory or one-size-fits-all demonstrations and coaching. Since professional development is about learning, then it should be done in teaching–learning situations, and not just theorized.

R – *Reflective*: Collaborative professional development naturally prompts teachers to reflect *in*, *on*, and *through* their actions. It promotes collective and situated learning from practice that is shared with like-minded colleagues.

E – *Evaluated*: Lastly, effective professional development activities and their products are systematically evaluated in light of the goals pursued. In this sense, all activities should be assessed in an ongoing manner so that changes can be made to the process of teacher development, if needed, as well as to gauge the potential of certain activities for teacher learning.

Figure 1. Inspire: Principles of Effective Professional Development (from Richardson & Diaz Maggioli, 2018)

Conclusion

As can be seen from the discussion above, effective, collaborative teacher development is a systemic endeavor. Each of the principles discussed heavily relies on the possibility of teachers coming together to learn more about their craft. They each emphasize the inherently situated nature of teacher learning as part of a community endeavor. Instead of providing just a final result, collaboration helps build communities of practitioners who collectively take responsibility for their students' learning. Promoting a more collaborative mindset is one way in which we can all support educational change.

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