

# GROWING TOGETHER AS PROFESSIONALS



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When conference organizer Lin Yai Shem sent me the conference theme *Beyond Language Teaching: Growing Together*, I began immediately to think of a focus of some of my recent work: teachers' professional development. In a profession as demanding as teaching, opportunities for professional development and renewal are crucial if we are to meet the challenges of helping ourselves and our students grow, not only linguistically, but also socially, emotionally, and intellectually. The term professional development means different things to different people, so I would like to begin by thinking about some of the meanings attached to the term.

In many elementary and secondary schools and school systems in the United States, professional development (sometimes the terms staff development or staff training are used) is equated with inservice workshops on teaching or assessment methodologies. These are events typically organized by persons outside the classroom, and they consist of bringing a large group of teachers together to listen to a presentation from an expert from outside the school or district. At the university level, or at least at my university, a common professional development activity presented by the university level Center for Teaching and Learning is the offering of generic workshops

for faculty members on ways to improve their teaching. Another view of professional development involves the opportunity to attend conferences, such as this one, in order to listen to plenary speakers, participate in teaching demonstrations, poster sessions, and workshops, and examine new professional materials in exhibit areas. Still others equate professional development with the completion of university or institute coursework which leads to an advanced degree or an additional certification.

As I reflect on my own experiences both as provider and recipient of professional development, I remember attending workshops where I would become excited by a one day presentation, after which I would return to my own classroom. Most often, if I tried out something I learned, I found that I generated a large number of questions which I couldn't ask because the presenter was not available to me. Often I wasn't able to meet with other colleagues who might be struggling in ways similar to my own, and, all too frequently, I gave up on what I had been trying. At conferences I have found that formal presentations are one way that I renew myself professionally, but more important have been the informal opportunities to dialogue with presenters and fellow conference participants, and, more recently, continued contact with colleagues through electronic mail.

In thinking back to my university graduate school classes, the most significant learnings came when we students formed study groups to discuss what we had been reading, to collaborate on a project and presentation, or even to study for a statistics exam.

Recently my own professional life has been particularly enriched through two kinds of collaboration, which have influenced my take on professional development. The first is the team teaching in which I have engaged for the last two years. A group of four of us, two university teacher education faculty members and two doctoral students, collaboratively teach a group of preservice elementary education students, teaming together in what we have come to call our literacy block. Students earn credits for coursework in reading methods, language arts methods and a literacy practicum, and we plan our teaching every week. The second has been my participation in professional Book Clubs. In case you are not familiar with the idea of the Book Club, this is a group of people that comes together voluntarily, chooses a book to read every month or so, and then meets to discuss the book. The Book Club experience with literature has led some to experiences with a professional Book Club. On one occasion, for example, a group of teacher educators read Linda Darling-Hammond's *The Right to Learn* and came to multiple groups

meetings having chosen quotations to consider and use as we examined our teacher education program. I also have been a member of a book club consisting of teacher educators and elementary school teachers who were working on an innovative teacher education. In this group we read Paolo Friere's Pedagogy of the Oppressed and David Purpel's The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education and talked about what these books meant for us as teachers and teacher educators.

Participation in these kinds of groups has made me especially sensitive to the critiques I have read of more traditional, transmission based professional development (Barth, 1990; Lieberman & Miller, 1991) and anxious to continue to participate in what I would call more progressive, more transactional professional growth efforts, where teachers' questions and issues are central to the work, and where there is time and opportunity for sustained dialogue among professionals. In this plenary I will share three examples of transactional, democratic professional growth opportunities for teachers, describing how they were organized and carried out. I will suggest ways that they might be adapted to the varied needs and interests of teachers in this audience. And I will offer a list of principles that I think apply across the groups to make them effective vehicles for us as English teachers to grow as professionals.

My first example comes from the work of another plenary speaker at this conference, Dr. Kathy Short from the University of Arizona, and a group of elementary school teachers in Tucson, Arizona in the United States. In a clearly written book called Teacher study groups: Building community through dialogue and reflection (Berchak, Connor, Crawford, Kahn, Kaser, Turner and Short, 1998) these professionals share their journey of establishing and maintaining teacher study groups in two elementary schools. The groups came into existence after Kathy took a proposal to establish a school

based teacher study group around the broad topic of literature based reading to an assistant superintendent of schools in the Tucson Unified School District. The assistant superintendent contacted several school principals. From those who responded a site was chosen.

Kathy's proposal to facilitate the development of a school based teacher group grew out of her increasing frustration with the isolated, onetime or short term nature of much of the inservice work she did with local teachers and schools. The Tucson Unified School District had been promoting literature based literacy teaching. Many teachers in the district were expressing frustration that the district was mandating or supporting this new approach but was not really supporting teachers as they struggled to implement this new way of teaching. So Kathy proposed a long term professional development model in which groups of teachers would establish their own learning agenda. Teachers would raise issues and ask questions, and they would determine the topics of the study groups. And teachers themselves, rather than outside experts, would collaborate to decide how to address the issues and questions they raised. Thus the study group participants were or became responsible for thinking together, for dialoguing, for discussing issues, for being and becoming their own experts. Outside experts, whether in human or print form, became resources the teachers in their deliberations.

It may be helpful to start with the teachers' own description of a study group. In their book the authors write:

We saw the study group as a place where we could negotiate a shared agenda instead of having someone else's agenda imposed on us. We knew that our focus was on recognizing collaborative dialogue as a way of thinking through our issues and concerns, rather than relying on outside experts. For us, the study group signaled that we were the experts and the best

coordinators of our professional growth...The group was a place where we could explore and develop innovations that came from our questions and interests, rather than relying on mandates and prescriptive approaches. Instead of changing our teaching with each new fad or mandate, we wanted to thoughtfully critique our own beliefs and practices, explore alternative possibilities, and take charge of our own professional journeys ( p.13).

So how did the group come together? How did the participants organize themselves? How did the group function? The study groups began formally when Kathy visited school faculty meetings and explained how a group would function. It was to be formed as a voluntary group of teachers, open to any teacher who wished to join. The group would meet after school for an hour and a half every other week to talk about issues and concerns related to the topic of literature-based curriculum. Group meetings would be structured so that teachers would dialogue and reflect with each other, rather than listen to presentations from outside consultants. Initially, Kathy facilitated the discussions, but she later turned over this work to teachers.

At the first meeting, the teachers who volunteered for the group brainstormed, creating a list of issues of concern that had arisen as group members considered moving toward a literature-based curriculum. The group used this list to reach an agreement about the issue to be discussed at the next meeting. Subsequent meetings of the study group, held in the classrooms of study group members, were structured in the following way:

- 1) As group members gathered, those who had volunteered to do so passed around snacks.

- 2) The group opened with an invitational query from the facilitator: Does anyone have anything to share? Various group members shared for 15 to 20 minutes.

3) Following a period of sharing the facilitator moved the group to the topic of the day. The bulk of the meeting was spent discussing this topic.

4) About 10- 15 minutes before the end of the session, the facilitator moved the group to negotiate the focus of the next meeting. Sometimes the members of the group elected to read an article or book chapter related to the topic, or bring something to the next meeting, sometimes not.

In addition to establishing a meeting structure, it also became important to the functioning of the study group to assign roles to various study group members on a voluntary and rotating basis. In addition to the snack providers and the facilitator, whose role I will discuss more in detail below, other important roles that emerged were those of timekeeper and notetaker. The timekeeper's job was to remind members and the facilitator of the passage of time, as that related to the three basic parts of the meeting agenda; sharing, focused discussion and negotiation of the next meeting focus. The notekeeper kept a list of key issues, topics and questions discussed which could be read at the end of the meeting to summarize what had been discussed. This proved to be very useful as participants were considering a topic for the next meeting. Within a week of the meeting, the notetaker provided a written copy of the notes and a reminder of the next meeting's focus and assignment (if any) to study group members.

Probably the most important study group role is that of facilitator. Short and her colleagues summarized the work of the facilitator in this way:

The major responsibilities of the facilitator are to enact the structures that the group has established for the meeting and to support productive talk in the group. As facilitators we spent time before the group met to think about the focus for that session and possible directions the group might take. We considered possible experiences,

articles, or materials that might support the discussion. We did not assume that any of these ideas would be used, but we tried to be prepared with options to suggest in case the discussion bogged down.

The reality of the facilitator, as you may imagine or know directly if you have ever served as a facilitator, is quite complex. The opening the meeting, moves from one area of the agenda to the next, encourages all participants to speak, follows up on comments to extend dialogue, works to prevent some members dominating the group and silencing. In their book Short and her colleagues provide guidelines and examples for facilitators that I personally have found helpful.

The study group concept that Kathy Short first proposed became a multiyear, continuing, teacher centered professional development opportunity in the two schools that were the originators of the model in TUSD and later in other schools in the district. After the first year, each teacher study group chose its own topic and then negotiated a biweekly meeting focus. The teacher study group, then, is one structure that suggests that teachers who choose to volunteer come together, negotiate a topic of interest, and, on a regular basis, explore aspects of that topic. I can think of many topics in language teaching that could serve as the basis for a teacher study group, in a variety of settings. In addition to the school based study groups that are delineated by Short et al, teacher study groups also could be formed: by teachers from different schools who want to investigate a particular topic; by teachers who want to read and discuss a professional book or set of articles; by teachers who want to read and discuss literature or engage in their own writing; by teachers who have the same position in their school or schools

The second example I want to share comes from one of your own Colombian colleagues and an active ASOCOPI member, Dr. Amparo Clavijo. In her book Formación de maestros, historia y vida (Clavijo-Olarte, 2000) Amparo details the

professional development program she and her colleague, Esperanza Torres, organized and carried out with a group of elementary and secondary teachers in public and private schools in Santa Fé de Bogotá. The impetus for the program was the Colombian government's recent mandates concerning long term professional development for teachers in basic areas of the curriculum. Amparo's and Esperanza's focus, as you might predict, was the study of literacy learning in Spanish as a native language and English as an additional language. Due to Amparo's position as a faculty member at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, the program was able to provide participants with six hours of university credit for their year's work. However, the experiences were not at all typical of university coursework of the lecture, examination, research paper variety. Instead Amparo and Esperanza based their work with teachers on several nontraditional understandings and beliefs including the ideas that:

1. Learners must construct knowledge for themselves as they struggle and transact with new information (learning as transactional not transmission based).

2. Knowledge construction is mediated through social interaction (learning as fundamentally social).

3. Learning is facilitated when learners have some choices about what and how they are learning.

4. Teaching is a personal, social, and cultural act that cannot be separated from who the teacher is as an individual, as a social being, as a family and community member, as a member of a society and as a student – a person who went to school. To change our teaching, for example our teaching of language and literacy, requires an understanding of our past and present learning, which necessarily involves examining our own histories as language learners and users, as literate people, and as participants in the language and

literacy experiences of school.

These principles played themselves out in work carried out by the Colombian teachers. Structurally the program took place over a period of a year, including 270 contact hours. One hundred and seventy six of these contact hours were group sessions, where participants met weekly with Amparo and/or Esperanza in three hour time blocks. The other almost one hundred hours the teacher participants were involved in curricular projects in their own schools and classrooms. The teachers, who organized themselves into teams, came from several elementary and secondary schools around Bogotá, and most schools participating were represented by more than one teacher.

The coursework itself was divided into three major modules or areas of study, plus an introductory module that acquainted teachers with the Internet and the use of electronic mail. The first module involved the teachers in creating narratives about their own personal histories as readers and writers, their literacy autobiographies. These provided an opportunity for the teachers to reflect on their own early processes of becoming literate, both in and out of school. For many participants this project meant talking with family members and friends as well as reflecting back on experiences and examining old textbooks, composition notebooks, favorite titles and so on. Especially significant for the participants was the creation of written personal histories. The teachers wrote drafts of their narratives, brought them to meetings and shared them with others. Thus they participated in the writing process of drafting, sharing, giving and receiving comments from others, and revising their work. They experienced the fear of sharing their work in progress, the support from other group members, the encouragement and suggestions offered, the possibilities of considering various forms of presentation for their personal histories, the challenge of producing

a final written product that expressed their intentions and who they were. Teachers were able to witness firsthand the social nature of learning in action. And the teachers reflected upon how their own histories as readers and writers, their own experiences with literacy, influenced their views of literacy learning and teaching, in both a native and an additional language.

Here are two excerpts from the teachers' literacy histories, excerpts many of you may be able to relate to:

Las primeras letras que aprendí fueron las vocales (a,e,i o, u) y yo tenía que escribirlas hasta que llenara la página. Las lecciones de lectura fueron basadas en memorización pero me encantaba el momento de leer en la clase. En cambio, el escribir derecho entre las líneas del cuaderno fue extremadamente difícil para mí. Lo que yo aún recuerdo cuando tenía siete años era leyendo y re-leyendo la historia de una C que se caía del cielo en la cabeza de un niño llamado Conrado. (p.63)

And here are examples of comments made by the teachers about the work on the personal literacy history:

Compartir las historias de lectoescritura fue una experiencia muy útil para todos nosotros. Nos ayudó a reconocer que para enseñar la lectura y la escritura no se necesita un proceso tradicional y limitado sino un proceso interactivo, funcional y dinámico.

Conocer las experiencias de lectoescritura de los otros compañeros nos dio nuevas ideas para desarrollar con nuestros estudiantes. También me ayudó a reflexionar sobre las fortalezas y los errores en mi enseñanza para organizarla de una manera mejor (p.64)

The second major module involved the participants in reading and discussing articles and book chapters that presented recent research and theories. These readings related both to the processes of reading and writing

and to how children and adolescents learn to read and write, perspectives that might be termed *sociopsycholinguistic*, constructivist, social interactionist, and transactional. In addition participants read about how these views of literacy might manifest themselves in classroom practice. Participants came to weekly sessions prepared to discuss what they had read and to explore the significance of what they were learning to personal, social and cultural aspects of literacy learning, including the learning in their own classrooms. Over time these readings and group reflections influenced the teachers' understandings, as these excerpts from teachers' comments indicate:

Yo reconozco que leer y escribir con procesos que se originan en lo que es significativo para cada individuo (p.65)

Ahora yo considero que los estudiantes son sujetos activos en el proceso de aprendizaje y que la escuela y el salón son contextos importantes para formar lectores y escritores (p.67)

Ahora yo sé que los niños pueden de forma autónoma construir conocimiento. A través del programa de lectoescritura yo aprendí que el ambiente donde los niños están inmersos les ofrece múltiples fuentes para aprender a leer y a escribir. (p.67)

The third module asked the teacher participants to design and carry out classroom projects that reflected their new and developing understandings of the processes of literacy development in their students. Participants needed to consider ways that they could use and adapt to their own situations what they were discovering about literacy learning. Prior to carrying out their projects, participants brought their ideas, in proposal form, to their regular weekly meetings. There they received supportive suggestions for their projects. As the curricular innovations came into being in the schools, the teams of teachers formed initially proved to be

invaluable in supporting the work of colleagues. This was true especially when several teachers taught in the same building. New teaching approaches and strategies became more visible they were being tried out in multiple classrooms. Teachers also shared their completed projects with each other.

Answers to interview questions and teacher commentaries shared by Amparo in her book suggest significant changes, not only in the teachers' views of themselves as readers and writers, but also in their understandings of their students as constructors of their own literacy, as social beings whose learning is facilitated through collaboration, as individuals who bring significant prior knowledge and experiences to school with them, knowledge which can be used in the classroom, as users of language whose literacy development needs to be viewed in terms of multiple communicative functions. The participants also reached the conclusion that literacy processes and effective practices in Spanish and English were more similar than different.

So here is the second example of what I would call professional development where teachers are at the center of the process. In this case a vehicle for the professional development was university credit, but the focus was on teacher collaboration, with reflection (both reflection about personal learning and about one's teaching), action, and critique as central features. What I would suggest can be adapted to multiple settings quite easily, and with powerful results, is the investigation of our own personal histories as readers and writers. This self examination of our own literacy learning, within the context of a supportive community of colleagues, is a powerful way to begin to think about our literacy teaching.

The third example I would like to share with you is one in which I have been involved personally for the last three years, and one which was conceptualized by a professional organization. The

professional organization is the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the professional development model I will describe is the NCTE Reading Initiative (RI). The RI model is a school based professional development opportunity in which volunteer teams of 8 to 10 teachers and at least one school administrator meet two or three times a month, once with an outside consultant and once or twice without the consultant. I have just completed serving for three years as a consultant to a team of educators from a public, elementary and middle bilingual school in Phoenix, Arizona, and my comments are based on this perspective (Smith & Hudelson, 2001).

As study groups affiliated with the RI, team members and the consultant receive materials from the NCTE that they are able to utilize in their meetings. All the materials are related to the reading process and to classroom practices and structures that support students' literacy development. These include articles and book chapters, possible learning activities in which team members might engage during RI meetings and outside, audio and videotapes, and overhead transparencies. There are materials available both for elementary teachers and for those that work in secondary settings.

The Reading Initiative and the participant materials have been organized around four major themes or emphases:

- 1) a consideration of ourselves (the team members) as readers, both our histories as readers and our current reading practices and preferences;
- 2) the development of a professional knowledge base about the reading process and classroom practice;
- 3) the careful observation over time of a student reader;
- 4) a focus on the growth and nurturance of collaborative relationships among the members of the team.

The agenda for each of the meetings includes an engagement with each of the themes of the Initiative.

The first two themes or emphases, learning about ourselves as readers and developing a knowledge base, are related to the first two modules of the Colombian program just described. However, in the RI we have focused less on our histories as readers and more on our current reading lives. For example, prior to one meeting we all agreed to complete an activity that required us to keep an inventory, for one entire day, of what we read and why. In a subsequent RI meeting, we shared our inventories and discovered that most of what we read was either work or daily life related. We read in order to carry out our work and family responsibilities or for information, and we didn't read for joy or pleasure (even though most of us had noted earlier in an inventory of ourselves as readers how much we loved to read for recreation). Having made this discovery, we decided that, as a group, we would choose a children's or adolescent novel to read every month and spend time in our meetings discussing our responses to the novel we had chosen. We chose award winning children's and adolescent books that we might use in our own classrooms, and that we really wanted to read. So for several months the part of the agenda that dealt with our personal reading took the form of a literature study group.

The articles and book chapters provided by NCTE gave us a variety of professional readings from which to choose, and we would agree to read one or two between meetings so that we could discuss them when we next met. Additionally, team members had specific books that they suggested the group read and study. So, as a team, over several months we assigned ourselves outside reading from the books, and every month we talked about what we had read from Jane Hansen's book on literacy assessment, *When learners evaluate* (1997), and Katie Wood Ray's book on writing,

Wondrous words (1999). Since the Reading Initiative site was a Spanish-English bilingual school, we were always thinking about how what we were reading applied to students reading in Spanish and to English as a second language learners.

The third theme of the Reading Initiative focuses on teachers identifying a student and observing that student over time. The idea is that close observation of one learner assists teachers in understanding all students. In our team, teachers identified a student of interest and carried out various observations or interactions with that student. They then brought what they had done to the team meeting, where they shared observations and discussed certain student learners in depth. Sometimes all team members engaged in the same activity. For example, one month everyone interviewed their students about their views on reading, using an interview protocol developed by Carolyn Burke of Indiana University (Weaver, 1994). This interviews includes questions as: What do you think reading is? What do you do when you are reading and you come to something you don't know? Who is a good reader that you know? Why is that person a good reader? and so on. Sharing student responses to the interview questions gave the team an opportunity to talk about what students' theories of reading were and what kinds of reading strategies students were using. This led, in turn, to discussions of classroom practices teachers might use to improve reading.

At other times, individuals asked specific questions about individual readers, for example: What does the student do during independent reading time? What reading strategies does the student demonstrate when she reads orally? How does the student participate in the choral reading of a predictable book? Team members would carry out observations independently and again bring their results to team meetings. Because teachers represented grades kindergarten

through eight, discussions of these student learners provided all team members with more indepth knowledge of the range of readers in this particular school setting, and how all teachers were contributing to the development of these students.

The final theme of the RI, the nurturance of collaboration among teachers, has evolved in two ways. One way has been through specific activities designed to foster teacher respect for and collaboration with each other. For example, one activity suggested that teachers visit each others' classes to document specific literacy practices. We adapted this to ask teachers to document their colleagues' literacy practices that demonstrated a valuing of two languages. Teachers arranged to visit each other and were excited to share what they had learned in a team meeting. A listing of the practices discovered provided all team members with new possibilities for classroom practice, and the activity itself increased team members' trust in each other as teachers opened their doors to each other. The spirit of collaboration also has evolved over time because of the organization of the RI, because of sustained contacts between team members, because of time carved out of busy days and weeks to devote to sharing and dialogue.

So this is the third of the professional development models that I wanted to share with you. Once again, I can envision across settings and age levels that teachers could come together around one or more of the themes of the Initiative, and I would suggest specifically thinking about ways to engage in close observations of one student and to come together to share what you have discovered. Understanding better how students are learning a new language and how they are responding to classroom practices, and making time to discuss these understandings and the issues the raise, are vital to our growth as professionals.

I would like to close by listing some features that I think these

professional development experiences have in common, features which I think are crucial for professional development that makes a difference in educators' lives:

1) Each of these opportunities involved people who chose to be involved; the groups that formed were voluntary in nature. People selected themselves, so that they had a choice in what they were learning.

2) Each of these opportunities involved commitments of time and energy. Participants were willing to attend regularly scheduled meetings over an extended period of time. Participants were also willing to engage in substantive work to prepare for some of the sessions, because they recognized that significant learning takes a commitment of intellectual energy over time.

3) Each of these opportunities had a structure that provided participants with a sense of predictability and expectations for the meetings, so that there was a sense that something substantive was being accomplished.

4) Each of these opportunities also provided some flexibility within the structure so that team members' issues and questions could be addressed.

5) Each of these opportunities used a substantive knowledge base about language and literacy learning as the foundation for the work in which teachers engaged.

6) Each of these opportunities demonstrated that learning is social in nature, that dialogue and collaboration enhance the quality of the learning experience, that we learn more when we work together than when we work in isolation.

What I hope is that some of you will take up the invitation to think about how to adapt some of the ideas presented to your own teaching situations here in Colombia, to grow together as professionals within the Colombian context.

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