

# Learning Together & Working Together: Aspects of Teacher Collaboration

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Collaboration between colleagues can take a number of forms—from the simple interactions of sharing of stories and teaching ideas to the intense involvement found in a professional learning community.

Teachers at our institution are presently engaged in a long-term collaborative effort to revise and implement the university's English curriculum.

To gain a better understanding of teachers' experience working in these groups, written reflections on the collaborative activities that took place within the two curriculum development groups was gathered over the course of a year.

The data showed a range of interactive processes occurring among the participants in the groups, including:

- **problem solving,**
- **discussing developments,**
- **coordination and synergy,**
- **role taking,**
- **learning opportunities**
- **development of shared resources**

(Agrifoglio, 2015; Brouwer, et al., 2012a, 2012b; Mak & Pun, 2015; Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Wegner, McDermott & Snyder, 2002; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015)

In addition, dimensions of a CoP—joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire—have emerged within these curriculum groups as well.

This research has prompted interest in a longitudinal measurement of the development of communities of practice in our curriculum teams, with potential to focus on how to stimulate community building amongst teachers.

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## Problem Solving

Engagement in joint activities and discussions, helping each other and sharing information (Wenger-Trayner & Wegner-Trayner, 2015)

*"We all worked together to come to decisions. I have worked in groups in the past.....and on occasion, the decision making was not as conflict-free as it has been this time. "*

*"The members felt that if they needed help with anything, from questions to help creating class materials, the other members of the group could be counted on to help."*

*"A clearer set of objectives at the beginning will improve the efficiency of the group."*

## Role-taking

Members take up roles, tasks and positions (Brouwer et al., 2012b)

*"While we didn't always have clearly-defined roles, all of the responsibilities were picked up by individuals."*

*"People seemed to find a niche and contributed to the work of the group."*

*"Personally, I felt that we shared the work fairly equitably and that each member of the group contributed a lot."*

*"We had good discussions about the direction of the group, and I think we delegated the responsibilities well."*

*"I think more clearly defined roles would help."*

## Discussing Developments

Rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation (Wenger, 1998)

*"...engaging in conversations always sheds light on some perspective I hadn't thought of or considered."*

*"In my experience here this is the best working group I've been a part of. Above all, I think having a shared goal and a positive environment that encouraged questions, conversations, development and criticism contribute to this."*

*"We held weekly meetings just to check in with each other which helped to keep us all on the same page."*

*"Having a small group means that everyone has the opportunity to have their viewpoint heard, and has the chance to contribute fairly equally."*

*"Sometimes I felt that during meetings there were too many ideas flying around and there was a lot of confusion sometimes."*

## Communities of Practice

Groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. (Brouwer et al., 2012a)

### ➤ Joint Enterprise – What it is about

A process in which people are engaged and working towards a common goal

(Li et al., 2009)

### ➤ Mutual Engagement – How it functions

Relationships that bind members into a social entity

(Wenger, 1998)

### ➤ Shared Repertoire – What it has produced

Shared communal resources, routines, tools, ways of doing things or concepts

(Brouwer et al., 2012b)

*"The sense of ownership of the curriculum is important, I think, for every teacher. I wasn't just teaching what I had been told to teach, I was teaching materials that I had directly contributed to. The extra thought that went in to the design of each task was a huge benefit. When I design materials myself, without collaboration, the only test is once I'm in the classroom, but working with other teachers means the materials have been more thoroughly examined before they are used. I wouldn't say it was necessarily a lighter workload, but it was a more rewarding workload."*

## Development of Shared Resources

A body of common knowledge, practices and approaches (Brouwer et al., 2012a)

*"Each teacher was allowed the freedom to add to, not use or use other materials within the course as long as they could be seen to be aimed at our overall goal of improving spoken interaction."*

*"I actually enjoyed the relative freedom we had in the group to contribute to different areas of the curriculum."*

*"I was able to rely on contributions from my fellow group members."*

*"Talking about ideas or variations in materials in the meetings led to improvements in materials and new ideas of how to present content."*

*"The workload was minimized and it was good to use other teachers' activities which were sometimes things I hadn't used before."*

## Coordination & Symmetry

Sharing knowledge and experience, integrating ideas and materials, creating new approaches (Agrifoglio, 2015; Wenger & Snyder, 2000)

*"The new teachers, I think, took up most of the legwork in actually typing up materials for use, while the other teachers experimented with new ways of teaching that hadn't been tried in the past."*

*"Using Teams as our main means of communication was very effective. We could post materials within specific conversations, and this made it much easier to find the materials, ideas, and comments, and understand how to use them. This made the course materials much more organized."*

## Learning Opportunities

Encouraging learning through interactions and relationships among members (Wenger, 2002)

*"Especially for a new teacher, working in the group helped to lower feelings of pressure, as well as those feelings of working alone and feeling unsure of how or what to do that come with being in a new environment."*

*"This was my first opportunity to help plan a real curriculum and while I feel that I got a much better idea of how it all fits together, there is still a lot to learn. "*

*"Working in a group is really good for balancing the workload and learning from others."*



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