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Shall We Dance? TEAM TEACHING AS SUPERVISION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

A BAREFOOT COUPLE FLUTTERS ABOUT EACH OTHER LIKE TWO BIRDS IN FLIGHT. Eyes meet eyes. Her folded skirts flap like wings, his white handkerchief a flirtatious tail—darting high, then low; so, so careful never to touch—they whirl together across the sand. A traditional dance of the northern coast, *la marinera,* has emerged as a national symbol of Peruvian culture and identity. In a teaching context, it is a metaphor for transformational leadership.

One cool June evening, a North American visiting specialist shyly approaches a Peruvian teacher/supervisor in a small language center. Respectfully, he asks her permission to team teach some key instructional target strategies with her English language learners. She has the sensation that he is asking her to dance, and demurs, "But, who will lead?" They begin the lesson—she passing to him, who, in turn, passes the instruction back to her, and she to him again. New partners,

they inevitably bump into one another. However, as a rhythm becomes evident, the teaching becomes smoother and smoother. Steps falling into place, they effortlessly lead and then follow each other across an English lesson on adjective clauses.

With its blurring of the traditional binary of teacher/supervisor, team teaching positions supervision as reciprocal, reflective, ongoing, and participatory in-service development located within a community of supportive professionals. Specifically, this article proposes reconfiguring supervision as team teaching to construct a safe space for EFL teachers to continue evolving as professionals. Here, I speak with my Peruvian colleagues in arguing for team teaching as an alternative, and perhaps more effective, way of engaging teachers in sustainable professional development—one that simultaneously honors teaching as a learning process and challenges models of "banking education" (Freire 2003).

How we began...

In the cultural center where we first began using team teaching as an alternative form of supervision, the academic director, like many of her resourceful counterparts around the world, had turned to her veteran teachers for support with the day-to-day administration of the teaching of English. A handful of teachers continue with their full load of classes, but at certain hours of the day, they wear the hat of supervisor. Their various duties include assisting the academic director in interfacing with students and parents, administrative troubleshooting, curriculum development and scheduling, the training of new teachers, and observing and evaluating their colleagues. None of the supervisors with whom I worked were only supervisors; they were teacher/supervisors.

The observation and evaluation of instruction was, at the time, the most problematic aspect of their work. So often, *supervision* is a scary word associated with power over others, as opposed to power with others. When another teacher—let alone supervisor—enters *our* room, we lose our balance. We curse, tremble, sweat, shake, roll our eyes in disdain, and fake a smile. Evaluative observations are those rare moments when another teacher is with us in the classroom. That awkward presence is welcome only to the degree that the evaluation that follows—usually in the form of a checklist—fulfills our expectations. When the evaluator leaves, we breathe a collective sigh of relief with our students. We are finally alone.

But it doesn't have to be that way. Institutions can transform these traditional paradigms of supervision from the vertical to the horizontal—so that instead of reinforcing a patriarchal relationship of competition among teachers, supervision in the form of team teaching becomes a catalyst for mutual growth within a community of supportive professionals. In a move that fundamentally troubled our traditional understanding of supervision as power *over* others, I proposed team teaching as a form of collaborative supervision. Team teaching as supervision positions leadership as power *with* others.

One evening, during my second week-long trip to the center, I simply asked a teacher/supervisor with whom I had worked that morning if I could come to her classroom to teach with her. Or perhaps she asked me—wondering how the strategies we had worked on together as a group of teachers that morning and afternoon would take shape in a classroom with her students. Our mutual invitation that evening might also have been the inspiration of several pieces we had read that morning. In *Writing Down the Bones—Freeing the Writer Within,* Natalie Goldberg (1986) admonishes writers not to simply tell, but to show. To a certain extent, supervision reconfigured as team teaching is about showing and not simply telling.

In a team teaching situation, both teachers are responsible for student learning—creating a sense of solidarity and of teamwork. If the class goes well, both teachers and students deserve credit. If not, it is yet another opportunity for teachers and students to reflect collaboratively on the "why" and the "what next." So, that evening when I entered my colleague's classroom and began teaching with her, and her students began to ask questions and follow-up questions to each other, and to summarize and to paraphrase those responses—and it worked and didn't work—we both felt responsible.

We first modeled the short dialogue (with verbs taking gerunds and infinitives) that we wanted students to have, an exercise similar to the one in the book they were using and that they had heard on cassette the previous day. Then we teachers paraphrased each other's

response: "So, there are three things you like to do with your family. First, you enjoy taking long walks with your family. Second, you enjoy watching television with them, etc." We asked students to do the same in pairs and then report to the larger group. I paraphrased what one group reported and then asked a student to do the same, and we continued in round-robin. My colleague took two other students to the board to show them how to take notes on what everyone was saying. At the end of the session, they could report to the class what members of the class enjoyed doing with their families.

After class my colleague and I stayed a little longer to talk about what had happened and how we felt about what we had done and how we could do it better. We decided to try it again the next evening. And the next day, two of the supervisors/teachers asked to attend. Later that week, we began teaching with them on a strategy that they were unsure of, or that they wanted to share with us. We passed the week in each other's classrooms—not as supervisors, but as colleagues invested in the immediacy of teaching and learning.

First steps

Since that first evening, some things have become clear to us about team teaching. If supervision through team teaching is like dancing, then here are some basic steps—others you can improvise as you become more comfortable with your partners.

1. ***What does team teaching look like? What does it not look like?***

For us, team teaching initially meant one of the supervisors joining a teacher for part, or all, of a class period, and vice versa. Our initial pairing of supervisor with supervisor created a safe space for us to practice and reflect on team teaching and to slowly identify strategies for making it successful before we tried it out with other teachers. Although team teaching becomes more improvisational with time, it initially requires careful planning. It might begin with an authentic question such as "How can we increase student participation?" That specific question then takes on a collaborative problem-solving format, to which our notion of team teaching lends itself. Above all, team teaching requires grace. The idea is not to out-teach the other, but to teach better together. Whatever happens, the ultimate rule is to not make your partner look bad.

2. ***Find an eager partner.***

Team teaching is not for perfect strangers. As a prerequisite, it demands a climate of mutual trust, and risk-taking. Not every teacher or supervising-teacher is ready yet. The very idea makes them uncomfortable—and that is okay. Do not insist, or try to force yourself on someone who is not ready. Pass. Find an eager partner. Others will follow. We began with each other in short increments and with specific goals in mind—for example, figuring out how to increase student turn taking. Then, teacher/supervisors began using team teaching as a way to support new hires or to pilot new curriculum. Little by little, more teachers began asking if they could come to a class or if a teacher/supervisor might come to theirs—and again that was often motivated by someone wanting to share a specific practice, or to understand a specific strategy in a safe zone.

3. ***Set goals.***

Team teaching is more effective if there are authentic reasons for wanting to have another teacher join in a lesson. The motivation might take the form of modeling a role-play or a communicative strategy better modeled with another teacher. For example, if a teacher has never been keen on games, then it might help to match that teacher with someone who is. Or, if another teacher has a reputation for smoothly orchestrating complex group activities, then others might benefit from orchestrating an activity with that teacher. Different teachers excel at different things, be it a warm-up, or a discussion, or complex grammar. Find time to meet—before class to design how team teaching will lead to that target, and then after class to see how it did, or how it might next time. New targets will emerge out of the experience to provide another authentic question for follow-up. The goal of a feedback session is not a mutual patting of each other on the back, or an assigning of blame or incompetence. Rather it is to reflect on what you accomplished together, what you did not accomplish, and how instruction could be more effective next time.

4. ***Who will lead?***

Naming a primary teacher helps cut down on some of the negotiation and planning that

thoughtful team teaching requires. If one teacher takes more ownership and responsibility for instruction, then the partner has greater flexibility as to when to arrive and leave. Establishing a lead teacher ensures that the lesson, and ultimately the course, will be cohesive. It also forces the lead teacher to clearly and succinctly articulate his or her mental or written outline of the class to another—which promotes reflective teaching. In our case, keeping ownership of the course with the teacher allowed supervising teachers to move through several classrooms in a two-hour period, team teaching for approximately thirty minutes at a time with each colleague.

5. When to step-in and back off?

Team teaching requires a balance between stepping in and backing off. Although supervisors in a team teaching situation might initially feel the urge to show their peer how something should be done, team teaching is ultimately a reciprocal act. If the classroom is traditionally the domain of an individual with sole authority, it can be disastrous when a supervisor defines his or her role as teaching the teacher to teach. The idea behind team teaching is not to run teachers through an assembly line to make them clones of supervisors. Both participants have to enter the experience with the idea that they are teaching and learning with and from one another. On the other hand, both do not always have to be equally active, although they can be. At times, one can simply be a mirror for the other. The idea is to develop two teachers at once through a reciprocal, collaborative process of professional development.

6. Involve students.

Although we teachers like our students to work in pairs, rarely do they have the chance to see two adults, let alone two teachers, working with each other in harmony. More often than not, society positions teachers against each other as competitors in a *de facto* popularity contest. Alternatively, team teaching models the types of supportive relationships we hope to nurture among our students. It is important to let students know why we are team teaching, and afterwards to solicit their feedback. Transparency—asking for their help and feedback—highlights the idea that team teaching aims to better the quality of instruction, ultimately for students' benefit. Students have welcomed the fact that there are two teachers in the room, and consequently more opportunity for individual, quality attention with small groups and individuals. With team teaching, students feel they are getting more for their money—two teachers for the price of one.

Striking and holding the pose

Teaching is ultimately a dialogic interaction grounded in relationships with others. Supervision reconfigured as team teaching has become a heuristic for testing and revising our perspectives as we interact with the perspectives of others. Thinking about supervision as a collaborative activity has been a way to ask ourselves questions within a community, an embodiment of reflective practice and an ongoing professional conversation about what we do, and what we could do better. As team teaching affirms what we do in our classrooms, it also challenges us to do better, and to do more. Team teaching's insistence on making what is implicit in our pedagogy explicit leads to a healthy troubling of our classroom practices and belief systems. That reflective turn creates alternatives for our students, for our institutions, and for us.

Richards (1998) has characterized classroom practices as embedded in layers of information, attitudes, values, expectations, theories, and assumptions of what constitutes effective teaching. To teach, he argues, is the process of actively constructing a personal and workable theory of teaching. Teaching is the interpretation of those accumulated experiences. However, to a certain extent, embedded in contemporary notions of reflective practice is the phantom of the 19th Century Romantic hero. She, or he, is alone in the classroom.

Team teaching has allowed us, within a community of supportive professionals, to articulate and reflect on our successes and failures in an ongoing and mediated dialogue of professional collaboration. To that end, team teaching has emphasized professional development as socially situated in communities of practice. We teach with and through others. Team teaching creates spaces for teachers to engage in an ongoing (re)vision of professional identity and individual and collective agency.

Finally, in our community, team teaching is fundamentally a way to adopt and maintain an inquiry stance in the classroom. The critical decisions we make as teachers, from the

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moment we enter our classrooms until the last student leaves, have an immediate and long-term impact on the population we serve. Our teaching can benefit from collaboration. Team teaching as supervision categorically rejects a transmission model of teacher training of "How to?" in favor of "How can we together?" And it is grounded in the idea of teaching as an ongoing and constant cycle of critical inquiry in which teachers are co-constructing knowledge through dialogue, reflection, and action in a community of supportive professionals.

Sometimes we need and want another person to lead, to teach us a step or two. Or, at times, we lead and another follows until the steps become confident and fluid. With team teaching, a supervisor drops his or her role as an all-knowing subject to become a peer collaborating to maximize student learning. Madonna calls it *striking a pose*. The pose that is team teaching is one of critical, collaborative inquiry within a community of supportive professionals. Although sometimes we might hit a wall, or trip over one another—and for an instant or two look completely ridiculous—with practice the steps become effortless, and invigorating. What's more, with team teaching you have a partner to catch you from falling.

References

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