Communities of Supportive Professionals

Edited by Tim Murphey and Kazuyoshi Sato

Professional Development in Language Education Series
Volume 4
Tim Murphey, Series Editor

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Series Editor's Preface

TESOL's Professional Development in Language Education series was conceived by the TESOL Publications Committee as a way to provide a wide array of choices to teachers for continuing their development throughout their careers. The series is based on the recognition that those who contribute most to the profession and to their students' learning see their own continual learning and development as crucial to their work. Such professionals regularly challenge their beliefs, their methods, and the status quo; they seek out and explore a variety of ways to teach and learn. In doing so they not only contribute to their own professional development, but also create a contagious wave of excitement that entrains colleagues and communities of learners.

Professional development is the raison d'être of professional associations like TESOL, and thus we need to think more consciously about how we do it and challenge ourselves to seek better and more effective ways to develop ourselves. Besides making efforts to improve themselves and their students, TESOL professionals also seek to stimulate the profession and give back to the field. All the contributors to this series are sharing in this effort by offering insightful and innovative ways of professional development.

Volume 1 in the series, *Becoming Contributing Professionals,* is focused on what new teachers can do to continue their development. It seeks to inspire them to build on the excitement of initial education and incorporate continual development into their lives. A common thread in all three volumes, started here, is that technology can play a significant role in TESOL professionals' continual development.

Volume 2, *Extending Professional Contributions,* highlights midcareer professionals and looks at ways they have sought to continue developing. Most apparent in this volume is the amount of development that comes from collaboration with other teachers and researchers. Professional development is immensely richer when done with others in a community in which excitement and ideas grow exponentially with colleagues.

Volume 3, *Sustaining Professionalism,* looks at ways that more seasoned professionals have continued to develop professionally. Many of these chapters reveal how personal lives are intertwined with professional lives and how many professional decisions have major consequences for life histories, taking us to new places and giving us profound experiences. It is gratifying to see how we as TESOL professionals can continue to innovate and rise to challenges throughout our careers.

Volume 4, *Communities of Supportive Professionals,* recognizes that TESOL professionals can accomplish so much more when they are in communities that openly communicate, question, and share concerns dealing with their day-to-day work. The volume seeks to bring out some of the characteristics of high-performing communities and emphasizes the situated and emic aspects of such communities and how their "structure is more the variable outcome of action rather than its invariant precondition" (Hanks, 1991, p. 17). With that in mind, Goethe's words implore us to act: "Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now." Action creates structure.

These four volumes are testimony to the diversity, courage, and magic in the TESOL profession. The contents flow across the different stages of a career in TESOL and the various communities to which teachers might belong. From the chapters in each volume, TESOL professionals can see how they might stimulate learning in themselves and their colleagues. I am excited to think of the impact this series could have on teachers and on the quality of TESOL as it fosters professional development internationally.

Resource

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Introduction

Tim Murphey and Kazuyoshi Sato

> Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.
>
> Margaret Mead

Teachers have histories of the communities they have belonged to, and these histories can affect how teachers interact with and position themselves in future communities. In fact, it is often useful for people to become more conscious of their positioning by telling their stories of development in communities (Murphey, 2004). Telling these stories also constructs them, and the people who tell them, more solidly, giving people identities, values, and strategies to use in their everyday lives; people tell their stories not only to others but also to themselves.

Tim's History of Communities

I am the youngest of five children. When I was a child my whole family was involved in competitive swimming in Florida, where I grew up. I had no sense of coming

together as a community while swimming because swimming is mostly an individual activity. But between the races and while we waited for our events to be called, the children would gather around and sing songs with a guitar or ukulele.

In high school I had a sense of togetherness on the sports teams that I joined. I played basketball in a small school in rural north Florida and I remember being one of the few white boys on the team. In school in the late 1960s we kept our distance, but on the court we came together. And on the way home in the school bus after our basketball games, we would sing together—and, boy, could we sing!

Several years later as a graduate student, I had my first taste of coming together academically with a group of first-time teachers in a small staff room for teaching assistants. We were new and didn't know what we were doing. So we asked questions and told stories, we borrowed and shared, and we created our lessons together. We became very productive peer role models for each other (Murphey & Arao, 2001).

In my 25 years since that master's degree, I have experienced many academic environments. Some have been extremely gratifying and others, sad to say, have been extremely cold and lonely. I have often tried to create communities of supportive teachers and failed. At other times, however, such communities happened naturally and most often with classes of students. Why some communities work and others don't has been a puzzle for me for many years. So I decided to edit a book on the topic and to ask people to contribute descriptions of cohesive, supportive teacher groups. I immediately thought of Yoshi as an invaluable coeditor because I knew of his work with teacher communities and because I had had the good fortune to collaborate with him several times with small and large groups. He has uncanny insight and a wonderfully brave critical edge that challenges my thinking.

Yoshi's Group History

When I was 7 years old, my family moved to a new town. My parents worried about my brother and me because we were strangers there, but we soon made quite a few friends and became involved in many school and play groups. In Japan, older children typically take care of younger ones and teach them games and sports. So as I grew older, I

became a leader and looked after younger ones in my neighborhood. Unfortunately, those kinds of play communities hardly exist anymore.

In high school and university I belonged to a volleyball club, which helped me learn the importance of teamwork. I later coached the school volleyball team when I became a teacher of high school English. As a coach, I experienced both difficulty and success in creating a good team. I shared joy and sorrow with my students, and I still enjoy reunions with them.

My career as a foreign language teacher began at the same high school where I coached volleyball. Although I enjoyed teaching English in elective classes where I had a certain amount of freedom to teach as I wanted, I still had to comply with traditional teaching practices that generally aimed to prepare students for university entrance exams. I was torn between my ideal and the workplace reality. Then I met a group of teachers outside of school and found that I wasn't the only one who struggled to improve English language teaching in Japan. I became an active participant in an informal study group because they supported what I did and we shared our ideas and teaching problems (see Sato, 2002).

In the mid 1990s, after I spent $2^1/_2$ years in Australia doing my master's and part of my doctoral study, I came back to Japan and started to teach part-time at a couple of universities. I met Tim in one university and started to coteach his Saturday seminar for in-service teachers of English. Since then I have collaborated with him on various projects (including a few ski trips with our students). We strongly believe that teachers need continuous opportunities to learn through trying out new ideas, reflecting on what they are doing, and talking to other teachers.

While reflecting on how much I benefited from the study group I belonged to as a high school teacher, I decided to create my own study group. So, in 2000, I established a group called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) *Kenkyukai*. The group started with six teachers from the Nagoya area, and within a couple of years the number of members increased to 45 (Sato, 2003). We have a monthly meeting, and we share our ideas and teaching materials. I have also been involved in a high school English department's curriculum development project. With a colleague, I have researched how creating a collaborative workplace influences teacher and student learning

(Sato & Takahashi, 2003). My history of communities has encouraged me to further study and document how communities form, how they can provide rich environments for professional development, and how they can sustain themselves through difficult times. Much of this is illustrated in the chapters in this volume.

Why Do We Need Strong Teacher Learning Communities?

Short answer: They increase student learning and the quality of professional life. For the long answer, we turn to Wheelan and Tilin (1999), who studied the relationship between faculty and group development and school productivity. They looked at the actual level of productivity in 10 U.S. elementary, middle, and high schools. Schools with faculty groups operating at higher levels of group development had students who performed better on standard achievement tests in both math and reading, which points to the strong probability that the quality of the teaching a school can provide is related to the maturity and collegiality of its staff and faculty.

Talbert and McLaughlin (2002) looked at the quality of teachers' professional lives. They directly address fears of the community metaphor that many teachers may have:

> In his stunning critique of the "communitarian movement," Michael Huberman (1993) argued that strong school community most likely undermines teachers' independent artisanship by taking up time and limiting professional judgment. Through the experiences and voices of teachers in high schools we studied in the early 1990s, we argue that artisanship in teaching is influenced, for worse or better, by the character of teachers' professional community. In weak teacher communities, the most innovative teachers were demoralized by a lack of collegial support in addressing needs of non-traditional students; in strong traditional communities, teacher artisanship was squelched or marginalized by the standardized curriculum and assessments that enforced student tracking systems. In contrast, strong

> collaborative teacher communities engendered artisanship in teaching—by sustaining teachers' commitment to improving practice, through dialog and collaborations around engaging students in school and content, and by sharing and inventing repertoires of effective classroom practice. (p. 325)

To clarify this process further, Talbert and McLaughlin turn to the ethnomusicology of jazz musicians as an analogy and find that "individuals' success in learning to improvise depends on their participation in such communities of practice. Jazz musicians grow professionally through apprenticeship relationship and collaboration with fellow musicians. . . . community is the context in which they create innovations of practice" (p. 342). We could add that the more complete, diverse, and intensive the participation, the more people learn and innovate. In other words, the more people participate as fully contributing members with agency, the more they are stimulated. Strong collaborative communities encourage this kind of intensive participation. Weak communities do not.

After reading much of the literature on group dynamics and community building, and especially after reading and editing the chapters in this volume, what we expect of an effective TLC includes not only such positive characteristics as being welcoming and open, but also conflict, doubt, and confusion. Productive TLCs face important issues, and teachers' values come into question. When people are truly open within a group, self-doubt can be a positive result that helps them learn and change; confusion can be profitably generated and sociocognitive conflict provoked (Murphey, 1989), allowing for transformational learning (Schroeder, 2005) stemming from different perspectives, changing assumptions, and new behaviours. When discussion, argument, tolerance, and forgiveness are also working characteristics of the community, people develop and learn faster and better. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the chapters in this volume are true accounts. Each one recounts the struggles and setbacks as well as the positive aspects of forming a collaborative community to get things done in everyday professional lives. The authors bring the chapters to life by situating each one in its particular circumstances, and they use local and emerging epistemologies (Watson-Gegeo, 2004). To do this more poignantly, we allowed the

authors to tell their stories in more detail in the Steps section of each chapter, departing somewhat from the first three volumes and thus providing more contextualized examples and narratives that illustrate suggestions the authors may have. We felt this change in format was necessary in Volume 4 because of the added complexity of group processes for the successful realization of suggested steps.

We introduce the chapters in hopes that you will become as excited about reading them as we were. We present an apt strategy for effective TLCs in each description, but readers will recognize many of these same strategies throughout the volume.

Curtis (chapter 1), as a new director of the School of English at Queens University in Canada, describes a one-day in-house professional development conference in which his teachers gave short workshops for each other. He shows how they were able to shift from a judgmental stance to development concerns in their professional conversations and to cultivate a sense of community. He has since stepped back and let his professional development days be "owned" more by the participants (Strategy 1 for effective TLCs: Ensure progressive handover).

Like Curtis, Carreon and Sandorra (chapter 2) tell the story of a one-day professional development training, but theirs took place in the Philippines, focused on one topic (common standards for essay writing assessment), and was given by an (almost) outside consultant (Carreon, who is an ex-director). They show how discussing assessment practices can lead to teacher learning and be ecologically stimulating even in a one-day training. They give detailed descriptions of group dynamics forming around the group's emerging expertise and ideas (Strategy 2: Use the group's expertise).

Heigham, a director, and Kiyokawa and Segger, part-timers (chapter 3), created and initiated a new curriculum in their department. That part-timers were invited to contribute and in the process became part of a small and dynamic professional development community is significant. Communities of equal access and opportunity are crucial for longevity, energy, and creativity (Strategy 3: Be open and inclusive). Finding ways to involve the sometimes huge part-time population in educational environments is very important if people are to act upon the principle of inclusiveness.

Cholewinski and Sato (chapter 4) describe a similar effort to renew an old curriculum and the roller coaster ride of success and setbacks due to administrative and committee decisions. They include part-timers in their community and show how teachers can unite around and use student evaluations to push for positive change (Strategy 4: Focus on student learning). Curriculum development, student evaluation, goal setting, communication, and collaboration are all necessary ingredients for changing school culture.

In the third chapter from Japan (chapter 5), Takaki describes leading the development of a volunteer teachers' group for more than a decade. Starting with his university graduates who became junior high school teachers, Takaki scaffolded an open community that invited participants to practical monthly meetings. He helped them take more control of the structure and communications through newsletters, action research, e-mail lists, and yearly publications (Strategy 5: Sharing leadership is important).

Shannon (chapter 6) details his attempts at giving new English language program directors much-needed support in their university positions in the United Arab Emirates (Strategy 6: Fill a need). He charts the constraints and advantages of program directors getting together to help each other be more productive. The perennial question of how large and widespread a group can be before it becomes inefficient enters into the picture as they struggle to keep on track and avoid problems.

Thornton (chapter 7) provides an account of an ambitious project to unite a group of one-room schoolhouse teachers in Canada. With the help of a grant and a local ESL mentor, these Hutterite colony teachers met for a series of one-day sessions over the course of 2 years to support each other and examine how they could improve their students' English acquisition. Their students' first language was a German dialect and they were schooled in high German for several hours a day. The teachers therefore needed to be culturally sensitive about the changes they wanted to make (Strategy 7: Be culturally and situationally sensitive and particular).

Waldschmidt, Dantas-Whitney, and Healey (chapter 8) describe a professional development project in Oregon, in the United States, that involves bringing pre- and in-service teachers together to learn and

benefit from each other (Strategy 8: Cross boundaries). After 5 years of this ongoing project, involving approximately 300 participants a year, the organizers see that the five school districts involved are starting to assume more leadership and direction on their own.

The chapters progress from a one-day in-house professional development workshop to multiple years and distributed participation. Cisar and Jansen (chapter 9) take this a step further and describe uniting isolated foreign language teachers in the Pacific Northwest, in the United States. Their 2-year program started in June 2003 with a 5-day summer institute of hands-on workshops and another in 2004 that added leadership training (Strategy 9: Teach self-sustaining independence). The rural language teachers from six neighboring states maintained contact throughout the year with online action research collaboration, discussion boards, and occasional meetings at conferences.

The final three chapters return to what we see as a major source of teachers' desire to collaborate and form communities—their experiences as students. Roessingh and Johnson (chapter 10), based in Canada, describe how they formed a community of online teacher learners from across the world taking a class in curriculum design. The community formed over time through using carefully designed ice breakers, scaffolding the technology (Strategy 10: Learn to use good tools), and, once again, learning how to let group members participate more fully in coteaching and learning as the teacher/organizer steps back and students assume more initiative.

Kleinsasser (chapter 11) takes us back into the classroom with a description of an MA course on assessment. He describes how his course of primarily in-service teachers in Australia developed into a learning community by placing practice at the forefront. He shows that a TLC can be created from an MA course by integrating theory and practice and by facilitating active participation. We contend that the way teachers are taught can sow the seeds for community building. When teachers-to-be experience collaboration, peer appraisals, and a sense of community in their formative education, they will continue to seek these things as professionals throughout their lives (Strategy 11: Provide models for future positive experiences).

Cornwell and McLaughlin (chapter 12) highlight a group of graduate students in Japan who took it upon themselves to form a

learning community, partially for practical purposes (finishing their PhDs) but also for the love of qualitative research. They describe what we hope will become more of a norm for graduate students in the future—a self-initiated and directed collaborative learning community (Strategy 12: As Gandhi once said, be the change you wish to see in the world).

We think of this volume as a great conversation with a fine set of teacher-researchers about one of the most important things in our lives—belonging to teacher learning communities and contributing collaboratively to improving education and our world.

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