

Connecting Practice & Research: A Shared Growth Professional Development Model

By Jodi P. Lampi, Renee K. Dimino, and Judi Salsburg Taylor

Fundamentally, we believe that developmental education is about social justice. Professionals in this field are not only responsible to implement evidence-based best practices but also to ensure access to higher education. To meet this need, it is imperative that practitioners turn, as a supportive team, to well-established theories in order to make sound pedagogical choices. This creates opportunities for enriching and uplifting professional relationships. In other words, developmental educators need to be high-caliber teachers while also being advocates for students and activists for the profession. In this three-column series, we will present one partnership's efforts to improve practice through established research. This three-part series will examine partners' sustainable professional development model, describe specific theory to practice approaches, and discuss the validity and evaluation of their research efforts.

Answering a Call to Action

Collaboration between researchers and practitioners is an effective way to make educational research relevant, allowing for the specific needs of the classroom to be identified and the work of researchers to be more closely aligned to classroom practices (Montgomery & Smith, 2015). Taking to heart this call to action, two experienced community college faculty, Renee K. Dimino and Judi Salsburg Taylor, formed an alliance with David C. Caverly, an established university professor, to collaborate during implementation of curricular redesign, engage in faculty development, and collect essential data. They understood that the goal of educational research is not merely to increase knowledge but also to inform and improve instruction (Hinton & Fischer, 2008; Mortimore, 2000; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Additionally, Dimino, Salsburg Taylor, and Caverly wanted to underscore the value of developmental education to student retention and completion, while simultaneously striving to offer exemplary instruction to students. Thus, their practitioner-researcher partnership modeled the classroom paradigm as discussed by Hinton and Fischer (2008), that "practice shapes research as much as research informs practice" (p. 157).

Building a Shared Growth and Sustainable Professional Development Model

Founded on the principles of shared knowledge and expertise, this partnership focused effort on improving the curriculum and innovating practices for integrated reading and writing (IRW). In the evolution of their collaboration, however, the team acknowledged that professional development would be key to the overall success of their curricular redesign, particularly if they addressed the redesign through a social constructivist approach (Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, they recognized the need to support faculty in order to improve the quality of IRW instruction at their respective institutions.

Building upon previous research, Caverly introduced the generational model (Caverly, Peterson, Mandeville, 1997) to Dimino and Salsburg Taylor,

emphasizing the success behind a professional development model that addressed both pedagogy and content knowledge (Shulman, 1987). Its structure operates much like a cycle, in that participants learn from previous generations or decades of prior research and spend time practicing and reflecting on what was learned. Then, adding to the content knowledge base informing pedagogy, participants can pass the theory and practice knowledge to another generation, and in so doing come to understand better by teaching it to another (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Cohen Kulik, & Kulik, 1982). Thus, at the first level of this structure, Dimino and Salsburg Taylor, serving as First Generation Faculty (FGF), were afforded an opportunity for close collaboration with Caverly.

Reciprocal-Interaction

To reach shared goals, the partners met throughout the summer of 2013 and over the next academic year to discuss foundational IRW theory (i.e., Goen-Salter, 2012; Tierney & Pearson, 1983) and plan course content. Intrinsically practicing social constructivism, they first shared reading lists, made connections between research and practice, and built a plan for teaching IRW; moreover, they reflected individually and then came together as collaborators.

The partnership may have been initiated by researcher Caverly guiding practitioners Dimino and Salsburg Taylor through a range of theory, but due to the nature of their learning community and a social constructivist approach to their activities, all engagement between the partners quickly

became a reciprocal-interaction environment (Coburn, Penuel, & Geil, 2013). This resulted in what they referred to as shared growth.

Sustainable

Once the FGF were grounded in IRW content and pedagogy, Dimino and Salsburg Taylor formed a learning community with a group of four Second Generational Faculty (SGF) and Caverly provided professional development to doctoral graduate teaching assistants. Throughout, discussions among several "generations" were continuous, serving as ongoing professional development for all participants. As FGF, Dimino and Salsburg Taylor continued biweekly meetings with Caverly over 2 semesters to discuss IRW theory, consider interactions with SGF they were mentoring, and reflect on classroom practice. Meanwhile, Dimino and Salsburg Taylor also collaborated among themselves, apart from Caverly, in thinking through daily class preparations, sharing course materials, discerning theory to practice possibilities, observing each other's classes, and reflecting at the end of each teaching day.

In cycle fashion, all FGF created a sustainable professional development model by passing on their knowledge and expertise surrounding IRW to a second generation of invested instructors (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). This long-term approach to professional development afforded faculty and doctoral students ongoing opportunities to revisit theory-to-practice techniques, unlike the one-shot seminar, conference, or workshop

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common in faculty training. This professional development approach sustains itself as each generation passes on knowledge and expertise, particularly if the SGF successfully assume the onus of teaching and training to a third generation. This basic generational model, embodying a reciprocal-interaction collaboration, became what Dimino, Salsburg Taylor, and Caverly have called a shared growth model, in this case, the “ripple effect.”

Ripple Effect

As this structure continued over the course of an academic year, all three generations advanced in their professional understanding of the pedagogy and content surrounding IRW, resulting in shared growth. In fact, they modeled many of the practices also asked of students—collaboration, reflection, trust, flexibility—and turned their collaboration into a Community of Practice (Cambridge, Kaplan, & Suter, 2005), in which groups of people with shared concerns learned how to practice more effectively as the group interacted regularly. This deep, transformative, shared growth model mimicked recursive circles, such as one might see on water, resulting in a ripple effect. Indeed, this is a refreshing shift from the typically competitive academic culture to an environment where growth is shared and based on trust, autonomy, egalitarianism, and partnership. Simultaneously, faculty develop new understandings of educational theory and classroom practice. This is a model where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, truly enabling faculty to build uplifting, supportive, and enjoyable relationships, so much so that those involved became further invested in professional development.

Key Elements

Faculty investment and commitment serve as the foundation for such a project. Particularly, community college faculty have enormous teaching loads and committee requirements, so the demands competing for their time are significant. Nevertheless, this partnership upholds their social responsibility to be the best teachers possible. In addition, faculty need to believe that their collaborations are valued within the local community and beyond. Another key element is the need for some kind of inherent, yet flexible, structure. Effective teachers adjust, allowing their practice to change based on theory they encounter and new understandings built from group discussions.

Conclusion

In summary, the on-going, shared growth professional development structure of this model, requiring a reciprocal-interaction environment at all stages, included bi-weekly meetings with FGF and SGF, discussion of IRW theory and exploration of implications for practice, immediate application of theory to practice, curricular design/redesign, implementation of curriculum, mentorship of colleagues, and constant collaborative reflection. Because the model is grounded in social constructivism, it provides an immediate connection

between research and practice as participants engage in ongoing discussions and pedagogical implementations. This long-term professional development model resulted in faculty becoming independent researchers, leaders, and decision-makers in their teaching while also supporting a broader professional development model resulting in informed, high-quality developmental educators. In the second part of this series, we will address specific theory to practice connections, approaches, and decisions this partnership used during their IRW course redesign.

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available for explicating the language demands of a discipline or career, developmental reading instructors can begin by selecting a short text (approximately one page) that addresses a topic or issue of great significance to that field. Local experts can be consulted to identify a suitable topic and share insights about the discipline or field. Then, the tools of SFL could be used to identify language features that make the text problematic and develop appropriate supports (i.e., by having students break a sentence down into participant/process/circumstances or using arrows to track nominalizations). Developmental reading instructors can play a crucial role in piloting and designing

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SFL-oriented approaches to disciplinary texts.

SFL-based language analysis also seems to work best when used as a strategy for promoting critical literacy within the academic disciplines (Neal, 2012; Schleppegrell & de Oliveira, 2006). Although the potential of SFL in developmental reading classrooms has not garnered the interest of many researchers, other research on critical literacy

in the developmental reading classroom (Lesley, 2001) suggests that critical literacy approaches can accelerate literacy development. Ideally, the language analysis tools of SFL shared in this article could be used to prompt meaningful discussion about the relationship between language choices and bias. As Sanchez and Paulson point out (2008), “reading and writing instruction should not be concerned only with basic skills, but rather it should focus on how students use reading and writing to analyze language—in various textual forms—in order to understand the ways in which texts, and the Discourse that makes up texts, may impose

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