Foreign Language Teachers Making a Difference:
Developing Perspectives, Practice, and Products About Second Language Teaching
and Learning Within the Context of a Professional Learning Community

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The term "professional learning community" has come into vogue in educational circles around the country, over the course of the last decade. Authors such as Hord (1997), Reeves (2008; 2009), Fullan (2001; 2003; 2005), DuFour (2004), and DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) continue to lead the charge in calling for change in the culture and fabric of leadership in our educational institutions, from top to bottom. DuFour (2004) defines a professional learning community as a community with a focus on learning (rather than teaching), collaborative work, and accountability for results. Albeit simple in linguistic structure, the philosophy embedded in this statement of purpose leads to much more profound thinking on the part of the education professional, who is invited to go far beyond his or her *teaching* into the realm of *student learning* and *collaborative accountability* for results achieved.

Here in the Holliston Massachusetts Public Schools, we decided in 2005 to move from talking the talk to walking the walk. Our current superintendent of schools, Dr. Bradford L. Jackson, enrolled in the doctoral program at Boston College and used the impact and sustainability of the professional learning community (hereafter referred to as PLC) as the subject of his doctoral dissertation. He completed his thesis early in 2009 *(The Impact of a Professional Learning Community Initiative on the Role of Teacher-Leaders)*. The PLC model is still functioning here, unlike many of the past initiatives we have seen. We are dedicated as a school community to the improvement of student learning in all of our charges, K-12.

If we analyze the PLC model in terms of its "big ideas," we find the following:
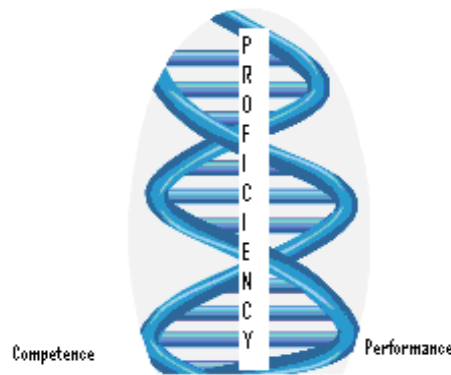
1. Ensuring that students learn

2. Establishing a culture of collaboration

3. Focusing on results

The very first big idea of the PLC model, ensuring that students earn, is more easily stated than it is accomplished. DuFour (2004) defines three essential questions to be discussed before we begin the journey of teaching and learning: What do we want each student to learn? How will we know when each student has learned it? How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

Our profession has long struggled with the first question: What do we want students to learn? For many years after our national standards were written, we continued to debate within the walls of our own profession whether we should focus first on accuracy (competence) or communication (performance). John DeMado, Susan Fenton,

and others humorously remind us that competence without performance means nothing. Yelling out the word "essentially!" in a crowded room will most likely lead not to communication of any message, but to the definition of this word as an adverb. Yet, in the real world, when will we ever be called upon to define words as nouns, adverbs, or adjectives in order to retrieve our bank card from a foreign ATM machine? Who among us has ever been stopped on the Champs Elysees and asked to conjugate the past subjunctive of the verb "pouvoir"? As many have stated, the role of grammar is to *clarify* communication, but grammar alone cannot *constitute* communication.

After many years of thinking about this subject, I have come to understand the joint roles of grammatical competence and spoken language ability as representative of a double helix, of sorts, in which there would also be an imaginary center line, representing proficiency, which includes both competence and performance. An infant babbling in his or her crib has performance not marked by real competence; the second-language grammarian may have written competence without a commensurate high level of verbal performance ability. A proficient speaker and writer of another language has both.

One aspect of second language skill development often overlooked by foreign language teachers in relation to what we want students to learn is the relative cognitive complexity of each of the language-based tasks: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Cummins (1979) has defined two separate and distinct categories of language skills as BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALPs (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiencies). BICS include tasks of lower cognitive complexity, while CALPs include more integrated tasks, representing a higher level of cognitive complexity. The terms competence and performance are not mutually exclusive by any means. Cummins has also defined the term BICS as communicative competence and the term CALPS as academic language competence, going beyond the level of basic interpersonal interaction (which is highly contextualized, given the presence of two interlocutors and the ability of both to attempt to clarify communication on an ongoing basis).

Oftentimes, when assessing the English proficiency of an ELL (English Language Learner) in our schools, non-ELL-trained professionals may mistake a particular student's interpersonal communicative skills as being representative of his or her level of academic language proficiency. While students quickly gain competence in the interpersonal domain (BICS), it takes much longer to gain real competence in the domain of academic language skills (CALPs). Since learning to understand and speak a language with BICS takes much less time than does learning to speak, read, and write a language at a high academic level, where should we set the bar for *all* learners? Shouldn't we at least ensure that our foreign language students will be able to carry on a basic conversation in the target language before they leave our LOTE classrooms? Too often, we hear our own colleagues state, "Oh, this student is not capable of learning a second language. Two languages are too many for him or her." I ask you to consider the following: Who among us has ever heard this statement made about an ELL trying to learn English? Has anyone in any district in any state of this country ever said that we should not teach English to a non-English speaker simply because for him or her, "Two languages are too many"? I think not. And so, let's answer this question: What do we want our LOTE students to learn? We want them to develop at least basic interpersonal communicative skills in a second language and to go on to further study, scaffolding the development of cognitive academic language proficiencies in more than one language.

The second question, "How will we know when each student has learned it?" is relatively easy to assess, once the answer to the first question has been determined. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) invite us to plan using the "backward design model" (not to be confused with the model of backwards design, which would put grammatical competence, and not interpersonal communicative competence, at the heart of a more teacher-centered curriculum). In the backward design model, the outcomes of student learning and the tools that will be used to assess and evaluate that learning are developed before the first lesson is taught. Moving backward from the outcomes of instruction, to the essential questions used to guide instruction, to the individual lesson plans developed to invite those essential questions is at the heart of the backward design model.

Of equal importance is the third of the essential questions used in organizing a professional learning community, and that is "How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?" It is indeed this question that poses the most difficulty and requires the most reflection on the part of us all. If we consider ourselves proponents of an inclusive curriculum for all students, how then must we proceed in reaching all students without becoming the exclusive source of instruction? An inclusion model called the "pyramid of interventions" graphically displays the concepts of an educational process known as response to intervention (RTI). Originally developed by the Georgia Department of Education (Cox, 2008), this graphic demonstrates levels 1–4 of intervention, beginning with a wide base of classroom observation of all students (Level 1), moving to increasingly intense levels of intervention with decreasing numbers of students (Level 4).

Although many in the area of foreign language instruction would argue that students in our schools will never be able to receive specialized tutorials in foreign language instruction, it must be noted that strategies taught to students in learning support classrooms can be generalized to the foreign language setting and that we need to

advocate for some degree of overall learning support in the form of learning strategies instruction for all of our students in need. Simple strategies and accommodations used by teachers in special education settings can be generalized to the foreign language classroom to benefit all learners. These strategies include note-taking, the use of graphic organizers, employment of multi-modal methodologies such as using visuals to help students understand auditory input, and frequent repetition of concepts being taught.

The second big idea of professional learning communities has long characterized the foreign language teaching community. Nowhere in this country is the culture of collaboration more evident than within the parameters of associations such as NYSAFLT, NECTFL, ACTFL, NNELL, and within online organizations such as FLTeach and Ñandu. Members of these organizations have long embraced the culture of collaboration and illustrate the effectiveness of sharing and working together to meet common goals. In a PLC, members collaborate to solve problems and offer solutions to the dilemmas of day-to-day instruction and school culture. Study groups facilitate shared leadership, training all participants in best practices of reflective thinking and reaching consensus, if not one hundred percent agreement, on topics at hand. The PLC culture is collaborative at its core, with a building principal taking on the role of facilitator of the discussion, not one of the singular decision maker. In a PLC, the role of the individual teacher as scholar-practitioner is valued and appreciated. Decision making is shared and follows a process of collaborative reflection and research-based discussion. Action (qualitative) research with roots in the individual classroom is as valued as is quantitative research conducted by outside individuals or organizations. The school functions as a collaborative whole, with shared responsibility and shared celebration. Teacher leaders are groomed and empowered to share their leadership ability as the entire school sets its priorities in moving forward to improve student learning.

The perhaps revolutionary difference between the concept of PLC and the 1980s concept of "teacher empowerment" is found in the third big idea: focusing on results. In the PLC model, teaching is never an end in itself, but a means to an end, and that end is defined and analyzed. If actual learning outcomes, per formative and summative assessment data, fall short of projected outcomes, then all within the community are called upon to collaborate in finding out why, and to remediate future results through the implementation of ongoing reflective practices and formative assessments. In the PLC model, the development of "power standards" defining the "essential to know" circle of the bull's-eye (nice to know, important to know, essential to know) becomes one of the first collaborative tasks of this community, and the implementation of ongoing formative (non-graded) assessment (assessment *for* learning) as opposed to summative (graded) assessment (assessment *of* learning) is an integral part of the culture of each classroom within the school. Data analysis includes the analysis of both common formative (rubric-based, short quizzes, or writing and speaking samples used for practice before summative assessments take place) and common summative assessments (graded according to a common rubric or scoring guide). Student work is analyzed, and strategies are developed to help students improve. Recent research in testing and assessment suggests that the ratio of practice assessments to graded assessments should be approximately four to one in favor of practice assessments in order to best improve student learning. Risk-taking and acceptance of error correction are much easier to achieve in a non-threatening environment!
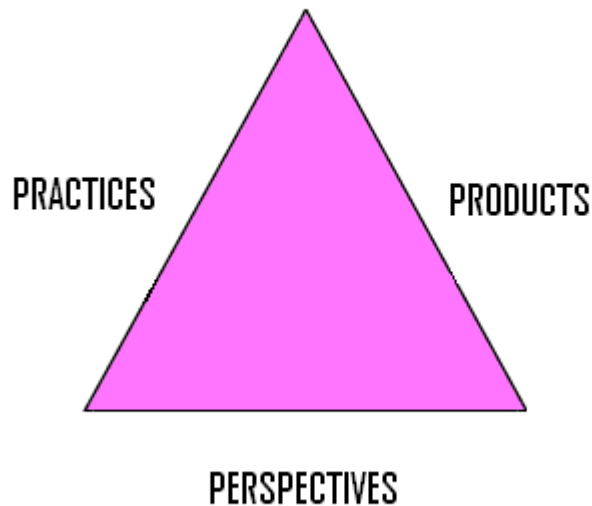
Perspectives, Practices, and Products

> "Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing more than cabbage with a college education."
> —Mark Twain, Pudd'nhead Wilson, 1894

Critical and creative thinking have long been the hallmark of our field. As foreign language professionals, we have long been familiar with the terms "perspectives, practices, and products" in reference to the "culture" strand of our national and state standards. In July of 2003, an institute on "Mentoring, Leadership, and Change" held at the National Foreign Language Resource Center at Iowa State University, under the direction of Dr. Marcia Harmon Rosenbusch, changed my thinking about the 3Ps forever.

During the course of this institute, leaders Cherice Montgomery and Cindy Kendall of Michigan State University led those of us in attendance through a voyage of discovery into what I now call "triangulation of thinking." Using the 3Ps as a model of this triangulation, we began to think of the concepts of mentoring, leadership, and change through this unique lens. For each of the three institute themes, we analyzed the possibility of multiple perspectives on the individual concept, the possibility of differentiated practices put into place and directly tied to a certain perspective, and the various products or outcomes of work resultant from putting into action practices tied to a certain perspective. We jointly discovered that if one's overall thinking is framed by a certain perspective, that perspective will certainly dictate what means (practices) one will use to obtain a desired outcome (product). If, in fact, the actual outcome does not match one's desired or planned outcome, it is, in fact, necessary to change either one's entire perspective or the practices put into place to achieve the desired outcome. By changing the model originally proposed by the authors of our national standards for use in teaching and learning about other cultures, Montgomery and Kendall led us into a realm of critical thinking that I have found essential in shaping the way that I now teach and scaffold student learning in foreign languages.

PRACTICES   PRODUCTS

PERSPECTIVES

After 34 years of teaching, I have arrived at a single conclusion: perspective is everything. There are many aspects of teaching about which I shall probably never arrive at any conclusion: those are the fluid, moving parts of this profession, the parts that make up what William James referred to as "the art and science of teaching." This one conclusion, however, is a keeper: *perspective is everything*.

Perspective is not permanent, mind you. Perspective is meant to change over time, just as rough shards of glass thrown onto a beach will develop soft edges and the patina of sea glass. Perspective almost always comes from experience: from one's own experience, preferably, or from the conglomerate experience of others communicated to us in various ways. Much of what we do, say, and believe is based upon our perspective. We develop, over time, various kinds of perspective: historical perspective, familial perspective, and personal perspective on concepts such as love and friendship. Teachers develop perspectives on teaching and learning. So do their students. Finding a way to share a perspective or to accept the existence of differing perspectives is often very complicated work.

Depending upon one's perspective on a certain topic or concept, one will put into place a series of actions or events constituting practices. These practices lead to an outcome, known as a product. As stated earlier, if the actual outcome or product does not match the anticipated outcome, then one must figure out why. This problem solving necessarily involves a change either in one's perspective or in one's practices, if the intent is to change the actual outcome.

The triangulation of thinking about teaching and learning through the application of the 3P model of perspectives, practices, and products has been an invaluable tool to me over the course of the last six years. The wonderful thing about triangles is that they are composed of three distinct sides. Therefore, whenever we view the triangle, we

necessarily see one side at the bottom, or foundation. This foundational element may change over time. For example, one may spend years developing one's perspective on foreign language teaching and learning. On a given day, at a given time, one may read an article related to best practices in foreign language teaching. If one substitutes one of the practices defined as "best" into his or her own triangle, he or she may wind up changing the outcome of instruction, which may lead to a change in perspective on foreign language teaching. Likewise, starting with a new perspective may necessitate changes in practices and will surely make a difference in the products, or outcomes, of instruction. Triangles have a way of always landing on one side, obliging us to focus on one aspect at a time.

Applications of Triangulation

This triangulation has also been very helpful to me as a methods professor. In my years at Boston University's School of Education (2004-07), I insisted that my teacher candidates develop portfolios as evidence of having met the standards for licensure. For each lesson plan included in this portfolio, I asked them to develop a triangle demonstrating the perspective from which they would teach the lesson, the practices they would be putting into place, and the product or outcome they hoped to obtain as a result of teaching the particular lesson. For a lesson on differentiated instruction, for example, we developed a triangle in class:

Perspective: Different students may have different strengths and weaknesses in learning and may need to experience different modalities of content presentation (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, musical, etc.).

Practices: Multi-modal presentation of the material in question, allowing students to demonstrate learning using various modalities of assessment.

Product: Increased achievement in students who might otherwise have met with less success if material had been presented in only one modality.

We continued to develop triangles concerning a number of topics/concepts over the course of the semester. My favorite triangle was this:

Inclusion Model in Foreign Language Classes

> **Perspective:** All students can learn to effectively communicate in at least one language other than English.
>
> **Practices:** Inclusive, multi-modal, differentiated teaching and assessment with a focus on highly contextualized, cognitively engaging tasks, demonstrating real-life communicative scenarios in a student-centered environment.
>
> **Product:** All students achieve to high levels, meeting power standards established for the course.

Perspective: Some students simply cannot learn to speak, read, or write another language.

Practices: Developing lessons that are grammar-focused and extremely cognitively demanding; teaching those lessons in a teacher-centered classroom environment.

Product: A percentage of students who fail to adequately progress in foreign language courses, given no differentiated instruction to account for their personal learning strengths and weaknesses.

Since even triangles can come to be developed in a rather rote manner, I decided that I would add one more piece to the triangulation of thinking: a written reflection. For each lesson developed using this triangulation method, I required my students to add a reflection piece on how well the lesson went and what they might want to change in terms of perspective, practices, or product the next time they taught a similar lesson. I underscored the importance of reflection to the development of a personal perspective on teaching and learning, informing my students that the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards requires a reflective portfolio, which counts for approximately 60% of a candidate's overall score for National Board Certification. I cannot overestimate the importance of reflection to the personal and professional development of our nation's foreign language teacher candidates.

The 4th P: Perseverance
Fullan (2005) reminds us that it is "systems thinking" that will inevitably result in the type of long-term, sustainable change that we need as a teaching profession. For decades, we as a foreign language profession have been waiting for objective research to point out the value of learning a second language, not because it is simply good for the soul, but because learning a second language implies a journey through development of problem-solving strategies that are directly applicable to the study of every other discipline. The work of Bialystok and Taylor-Ward is beginning to help us point the arrow in a new direction: "Second language learning is not a singularly linguistic activity, but an overall cognitive activity which promotes cognitive growth, and is directly resultant in higher achievement in other core subject areas." In becoming systems thinkers, we as a profession are moving toward a much better understanding of the place of foreign language instruction in a child's overall educational journey. The world is shrinking, and the role of education is ever-expanding. The development of cross-cultural tolerance and understanding has never been more important to the continued survival of the human race. It is the type of systems thinking engendered by the thoughtful process of collaboration within the PLC model and the triangulation of thinking made possible through examination of perspectives, practices, and products on a broader level that is sure to promote the development of better creative and flexible thinking on the part of our students. Through perseverance and much hard work ahead, we will prevail in making our nation's educational leaders take note of the inherent value of learning to speak, read,

and write a second language to high standards. Through frequent and purposeful communication with parent groups about the value of second language learning, we can persevere and eventually prevail.

Your Place in the PLC of Foreign Language Professionals

The challenge goes out to all foreign language teachers to make yourselves a part of this fluid change, to keep abreast of what is happening in the broader field of education, and to make your voices heard among those of our nation's finest educational leaders. In one way, I have always thought that because there are fewer of us than there are teachers of other disciplines, it must be easier to assume a leadership position in the field of foreign languages. Through active participation in leadership conferences, including the ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), active membership in statewide/national foreign language associations, and continued personal and professional development, our nation's foreign language teachers can make a huge difference in the formation of tomorrow's leaders and in the status of foreign language instruction in our nation's core curriculum. Through the completion of action research in one's own classroom or large-scale quantitative studies, we can *all* make a difference in how what we do is viewed by the rest of our profession. After all, it is we who offer our students the clearest view of the rest of the world and, through the windows only we can open, an eye to taking their place in it. We have long practiced all of the concepts defining a professional learning community. Let us now turn our attention to developing new leaders in this, our chosen field.

Recommended Links

ACTFL: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. www.actfl.org

ASCD: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. www.ascd.org

DeMado, J. John Demado Language Seminars, Inc. www.demado-seminars.com

Fenton, Susan. Madame Fifi Publications. www.madamefifi.com

NECTFL: Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. www.nectfl.org

NNELL: National Network for Early Language Learning. www.nnell.org

NYSAFLT: New York State Foreign Language Teachers' Association. www.nysaflt.org

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