

LCTL: Let's Collaborate to Teach Languages

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Visualize this image: a rubber raft hurtles down a rapidly flowing river swollen by spring rains and snow melt. Rocks and boulders lurk just below the surface and along the shoreline, and the faces of the occupants of the raft show anxiety, nervousness, and fear. Who would imagine going on a white water rafting trip alone? No river guide, no fellow oarsmen, only a life jacket to cling to in the event of a dunking.



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It is not unusual to find that teachers of Less Commonly Taught Languages are expected to be by themselves in the raft; asked to "go it alone" down roaring rivers. They teach languages and explore cultures that are often mysteries to their colleagues and administrators and frequently do this as the only teacher of that language on campus, and many times, the only teacher of that language in their entire school districts.

But doesn't this description tend to describe a typical scenario for all world language educators or even all educators in general? A recent study by Scholastic and the Gates Foundation found that teachers spend only about 3 percent of their teaching day collaborating with colleagues. We tend to stick to ourselves and plan, teach, and examine our practice alone. This isolation can very easily become toxic. Energy and enthusiasm decrease, involvement with the profession fades, and innovation and creativity languish when feelings of isolation increase. In his classic 1975 book, *Schoolteacher*, Dan Lortie described teacher isolation as one of the main structural impediments to improved instruction and student learning in American schools.

Unlike other professions, teaching does not typically provide an experience that is shared with peers. Our primary feedback comes from the students we teach, not our colleagues. Even when teachers are given opportunities to collaborate, they hesitate. Collaboration can be difficult and is easily disrupted. Participants are expected to be vulnerable and open to feedback and critique. Collaboration asks us to be willing to work with others and to be patient while we learn to be more skilled at peer feedback and become more adept at analyzing instructional plans. We have to be okay with some discomfort because of temporary disagreements and recognize cognitive conflict for what it is and not take offense. All of these things lie outside the comfort zone of many educators.

The benefits of collaboration, however, are significant enough to take the risk. Collaboration establishes collegial (not just congenial!) relationships with peers. The expertise and capacity of participants is likely to increase as the collaborative relationship progresses. Instead of sticking with comfortable and familiar practices, teachers involved in successful collaborative groups are

inclined to take more risks when choosing instructional strategies. Collaboration makes participants brave! Allowing ourselves to be critiqued and questioned by our colleagues is scary, but it is also an indispensable step in the journey to be truly collaborative. When teachers successfully work in partnership, they build new skills and activate skills that have gone dormant. Energy, motivation, and enthusiasm increase and contribute to the development of growth mindsets around teaching and learning.

The challenge for LCTL teachers is to develop a collaborative relationship with the group that they come in contact with every teaching day: their campus world language teacher colleagues. While collaboration with language specific groups is valuable and necessary, multi-language partnerships provide a broader range of perspectives, experiences, and skills. Growing our connections with other language teachers, regardless of the language focus, has the potential to be a powerful tool for our own professional growth. Successful multi-language collaborative groups exhibit common characteristics: They embrace the unique perspectives of each member; they are based on the sense that all participants and their contributions are valued; they develop trust and a sense of shared responsibility, and they have a strong sense of purpose and work towards a common goal.

How can a world language department, made up of teachers of a variety of languages teaching a variety of levels, be united by common purposes and goals? Our national organization, ACTFL, supports world language teachers with common standards and a research base for a rigorous proficiency-producing curriculum plan, assessment plan, and instructional strategy plan that is appropriate and applicable to all. The *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* have been refreshed and expanded to include the less commonly taught languages in their scope, thereby including all language teachers within a common purpose. Flowing out of that foundational work are documents which provide three specific points of collaboration for multi-language collaborative groups.

- The *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* put a face and a name on how well our students acquire and use the language. When teachers describe a Novice High learner, all members of the collaborative group, regardless of language focus, know what that student sounds like and can do. Working as a team to set a proficiency goal for each benchmark will direct every teacher toward the same target and provide a rich focal point for collaboration.
- In the same way, the *ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners* establish neutral research-based criteria and descriptors for performance assessments, enabling all world language teachers to clearly articulate where their learners are against the proficiency goal, where they need to be, and how to close the gap.
- The *NCSSFL/ACTFL Can Do Statements: Progress Indicators for Language Learners* bridge proficiency and performance in a student and parent friendly format. This document pinpoints global can do benchmark statements by proficiency level and communicative mode, further clarifying the common goals for our learners. Unpacking the global benchmarks results in unambiguous main indicators, target statements, and customized can do statements to fit the context or content of specific curricula.

Developing common can do statements for courses by level are a valuable and worthwhile task around which a multi-language group can work, giving all teachers a voice in the instructional focus for the level.

For many world language teachers, the primary mode of learning successful teaching techniques is through trial and error, characterized by repeated, varied attempts which are continued until success, or until the teacher stops trying. This is an unsystematic method which does not employ insight, theory or organized methodology. Educators who rely on trial and error are essentially gambling with precious instructional time, and while instructional errors and ineffective learning experiences won't harm our learners, they aren't necessarily acquiring language in a way that will meet our goals, either. Another great topic for a multi-language working partnership would be effective high yield instructional strategies. A great starting place for guidance in this area is the ACTFL website (www.actfl.org). ACTFL offers a variety of publications dedicated to classroom practices (its own publications as well as those of other authors), position statements, guidelines and manuals that are the subject of many collaboration communities and learning networks.

Although the situation continues to improve, teachers of less commonly taught languages must work with fewer supplemental resources, less access to appropriate authentic resources, many more unknowns and uncharted territories than other world language instructors. Developing a collaborative relationship with colleagues, regardless of the languages they teach, will be a win-win scenario for everyone. This quote from Richard Elmore, professor of educational leadership at Harvard Graduate School of Education drives the point home: "Teaching is not rocket science. It is, in fact, far more complex and demanding work than rocket science." Yes, the processes involved in language learning are very complex and intertwined and cannot be articulated in a linear fashion. Yes, there are neutral, good, better, and best ways to teach languages. Collaboration can act as a greenhouse and provide a safe and sheltered place to cultivate and grow innovative ideas, experiment with research based high yield instructional strategies, and, over time, transform a teacher or even a department. You can do it! And your colleagues can help.

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