

Converging Perspectives in the LESLLA Context

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There has been a surge in Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition (LESLLA) learners in adult language programs. In response to the growth of this learner population in language classes, there has been increased interest in the professionalization of the field of adult education specific to work with LESLLA learners. As researcher and practitioner awareness and understanding of the LESLLA context continues to expand, necessary and qualitative transformations of second language (L2) teaching and L2 teacher education are taking place. This article provides a glimpse into a larger ethnographic case study that explores the teaching worlds of two LESLLA teachers working in community-based language programs for adult learners in the United States. Guided by an activity theory framework (Engeström 1991, 1999), this article highlights the relationships and tensions between the teachers and the tools available to them within their teaching activity systems. This particular discussion relies on the shared experiences of the teachers to highlight the necessity and benefit of promoting professional collaborative learning opportunities for LESLLA teachers.

Keywords: second language teacher education, adult language learners, literacy education, activity theory, LESLLA

1 Introduction

In the United States, increasing numbers of English language learners (ELLs) who have not yet developed literacy skills due to interrupted or unavailable formal schooling in their home countries are being enrolled in community-based adult English language programs. In addition to adding rich diversity and often newfound vitality to their new communities, newcomers with immigrant or refugee status have an impact on various systems within their local community, including public schools, workforce services, housing and community-based English as an Additional Language (EAL) service providers. In addition to the basic need to acquire English to live in the US, newcomers are often required by resettlement organizations to participate in EAL programs until they have secured employment in the local community. Many of the community-based service providers have long waiting lists of ELLs who are seeking EAL classes or a one-to-one tutor.

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In many programs, there are not enough English language teachers to serve the growing number of adult student populations. The community-based teachers that are available often experience a general sense of helplessness related to providing instruction that is appropriate and effective for LESLLA learners. Many L2 teacher education programs focus on techniques and strategies that have been successful with literate learners and those with formal education experience. While some of these strategies, such as Total Physical Response (TPR), are successful with LESLLA learners in promoting oral language development and building vocabulary, the majority of the strategies have been developed based on research with literate learners. They are often not effective in the LESLLA context. In addition, many EAL instructors in community-based contexts are volunteer teachers who are trained for their work in the classroom through brief, often one-shot workshops.

One aim of this study was to create a space to share LESLLA teachers' perspectives in an effort to shed light on the relationships and tensions that impact their day to day lives as teachers. The overarching goal was to contribute to what we know about teacher education, professional learning and program management within the context of community-based adult language programs. This article is part of a larger study that uncovers several tensions within the activity of teaching, as experienced by teachers while they interact with others (e.g., students, colleagues and administrators), expand their knowledge base through experience, and attempt to adapt teaching materials for teaching in the LESLLA context. The discussion provided by this article centers on the challenges and tensions that necessitate professional learning opportunities for work in this context.

2 Teacher learning

Teacher learning is considered a domain within teacher cognition that attempts to connect the important psychological and social factors involved in becoming a teacher with the processes involved in learning to teach (e.g., lesson planning, classroom management, mastering subject matter knowledge, examining learner characteristics, etc.) (Borg 2008; Calderhead 1988). Viewing teacher learning as a strand of teacher knowledge inquiry has strengthened the connection between teacher knowledge and teacher education (Borg 2008). Teacher learning involves the sense making that teachers employ when mapping their knowledge to their practice while continually reflecting on the interactions between them. Teacher learning is not a process that ends with the culmination of a teacher education program or training session but is an on-going endeavor that spans the length of a teacher's career.

2.1 Contextualizing theory and practice for pre-service teachers

Language teacher preparation often depends too heavily on using methods that are separated from their theoretical underpinnings and from the context for which they are most appropriate (Tedick & Walker 1994). Methods are often presented in a vacuum and methodology courses are treated like a "pedagogical catch-all" for teacher preparation programs, with an emphasis on a selection of

particular accepted approaches (e.g., the Natural Approach or Structured Input/Output) (Tedick & Walker 1994: 307). In a best-case scenario, theory may be tied into the methods course at the surface level with an introduction to prominent theories such as Comprehensible Input, Schema Theory, Interaction Hypothesis, and Noticing. Course designers, assuming the goal is to impart expert knowledge to the teacher-learners, often decide which theories to teach prior to meeting their students. In this way, course design takes place without consideration of teacher-learners' previous teaching and learning experiences or the teaching contexts in which they have been or will be working (Johnson 1996). Consequently, it is rare in L2 teacher education programs that teachers are prepared to teach L2 literacy level classes for adults, thus this professional knowledge base often develops through the act of teaching.

2.2 Honoring and building upon teachers' existing knowledge

Teacher educators must take into consideration the various types of knowledge that teacher-learners will need to be successful in their respective contexts and provide them with the tools for theorizing practice in an effort to make obsolete the perception of a theory-practice gap. "When students predict, criticize, and analyze their mentor's teaching, they start to 'theorize practice'. This is the starting point for connecting theory to reality" (Zanting, Verloop & Vermunt 2003: 200). They will regularly tap into this 'theorizing practice' skill set throughout their careers as they move through various teaching contexts, encounter diverse learner populations, attempt to explore emerging theories on teaching and learning, and all the while, attempt to find their voice and shape their identity as teachers.

In considering what type of knowledge is integral within the context of language teacher education, Freeman & Johnson (1998) propose a reconceptualization of the knowledge base. It is now widely acknowledged in both general and language teacher education programs that practicing teachers and the professional knowledge they possess are the cornerstone to improving teaching and, thereby, teacher preparation programs (Burton 2000; Clarke 1994; Gore & Gitlin 2004). Additionally, teacher-learners' prior knowledge and beliefs should not be extracted from the teacher preparation process (Burns 1996; Gatbonton 2008; Tsui 2003). Rather than solely transmitting 'expert' knowledge and educational theory, teacher educators should focus on the ongoing development of practical knowledge and highlight the existing knowledge that teacher-learners have available to them through prior educational experiences.

If teacher educators accept the value of teachers' knowledge in teacher development, teacher education programs must be reformulated to integrate and balance theory (conceptual knowledge) and practice (practical knowledge) (Freeman & Johnson 1998; Laursen 2007). In addition, programs should actively promote honoring the importance of teachers' practical professional knowledge (Gore & Gitlin 2004) and give more credence to the beliefs, assumptions and values that they bring to the teacher education experience. Freeman & Johnson (1998: 405) argue that

for the purposes of educating teachers, any theory of SLA, any classroom methodology, or any description of ... English language as content must be

understood against the backdrop of teachers’ professional lives, within the settings where they work and within the circumstances of that work.

Building on the L2 teacher education piece, however, we must also consider the development and integration of teacher knowledge for those who completed their L2 teacher education programs long ago and now face new challenges and new learner populations in the classroom.

2.3 Community-based adult education – Framing the context

Adult education programs in the US (e.g., Adult Basic Education (ABE) and adult EAL programs) offer classes to both native English speakers and ELLs to help them achieve goals related to literacy, job skills, family, transportation, and further education (Young 2009). Entities that provide adult literacy and EAL services include “...local educational agencies, institutions of higher education, community-based organizations, libraries, public or private nonprofits, public housing authorities, correctional agencies, family literacy providers, or consortia of for-profit agencies” (Sabatini, Ginsburg & Russell 2002: 19). The growing demand to professionalize the field of ABE in the face of limited funds presents a conundrum for these organizations, yet, they persevere with the strength of dedicated program administrators, staff, and teachers who are all committed to providing educational services to adults within their communities.

The changing learner profiles of adults acquiring L2 oral and literacy skills has resulted in an increase in students who have little to no formal education experience and in many recent cases (e.g., certain newly arrived refugee populations), no first language literacy skills to build upon when acquiring English oral and literacy skills (Young 2009). Teachers must not only be aware of the challenges faced by the ELLs, but also a host of other components that comprise the overall knowledge base that LESLLA teachers rely on to inform their practice (Vinogradov & Liden 2009; see Table 1). Developing this knowledge base is a process that demands prolonged and meaningful exchanges with learners, engagement with the emerging research within this context, collaborations with peers and mentors in the field, and continued involvement in context specific professional learning opportunities that support sustained teacher growth.

Table 1. Knowledge base for LESLLA teachers (Vinogradov & Liden 2009)

1. The refugee experience	6. Key research
2. Types of literacy-level learners	7. Components of reading
3. Literacy in childhood vs. adulthood	8. Balanced literacy
4. Emergent readers	9. Approaches to teaching literacy
5. Second language acquisition	10. Connections L1/L2 literacies

2.4 Promoting professional learning for practicing teachers in adult education

As teachers transition into their careers, develop their identities as practitioners, and increase their knowledge base, it is imperative that they are given ample opportunities for professional development through on-going teacher learning.

Britzman (2003) honors the challenges faced by mainstream teachers, which mirror those of language teachers across contexts. They all bring their own stories and trajectories of teacher learning to the teaching experience. Britzman explores the 'struggle for voice' that teachers undergo as they face the unexpected tensions of the teaching profession. She notes that

teachers are confronted with a difficult existential truth about education rarely discussed and, more often than not, actively avoided: trying to teach is deeply unsettling and conflictive because experience itself - [...] 'practice' - is a paradox, an unanticipated social relation, and a problem of interpretation (Britzman 2003: 3).

As teachers embark into their new professional world, their take on the theories and propositions from their teacher education programs will continue to grow and morph alongside their practice, through their interactions and in negotiating the contradictions they encounter in their professional reality. They may be faced with the unsettling reality that their L2 teacher preparation was only the beginning and their professional knowledge base needs a lot of shaping. When considering the best approaches to professional development for teachers in general and teachers of adult ELLs in particular, it is widely accepted that they should be collaborative and teacher-directed. According to Johnson (2009), situating professional development in communities of practice allows for peers to scaffold one another's learning. This chapter demonstrates through an ethnographic lens how a lack of professional, collaborative learning opportunities can stifle teacher development and isolate teachers, especially those working in the LESLLA context wherein extensive resources are not readily available.

3 Activity theory

This study is influenced by the sociocultural perspective of human learning and, therefore, embraces the epistemological stance that cognitive development can only be explored and understood in relation to the context, culture, and communities within which the development takes place (Vygotsky 1978). This perspective also takes into account that all human action is mediated through the use of cultural artifacts and tools. The present study explores teachers' situated practices through the lens of activity theory, investigating how they use and develop their knowledge bases as tools for mediating activity and negotiating meaning in the classroom and within the larger macro structures that comprise their teaching context. Activity theory allows for richer conceptualizations of individual experiences, acknowledging that human activity takes place in collective practice, communities, and institutions and, therefore, is shaped and influenced by multiple viewpoints, relationships, tensions, and histories.

3.1 *Foundations of activity theory*

Activity theory is a theoretical framework that can be applied to make sense of human practices within a given culture and context. Human practices or actions are revealed through their interactions with their environment and explored through the basic unit of 'activity' or 'what people do' (Engeström 1987, 1991, 1999). Activity theory is often viewed as an evolved theory with contemporary variants grounded in the early work of Lev Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky posits that humans interact with their environment through the use of tools and cultural artifacts that mediate efforts to achieve certain goals or objectives. This notion has come to be known as the mediational model, which stresses that interactions between humans and goals are not direct, but rather require the mediation of tools.

Leontiev (1978) expanded on the mediational model to incorporate human activity and the interactions within practical activity, which arguably influence the choice of mediational tools. Leontiev viewed all activity as being comprised of actions carried out by a subject through the use of tools, which result in particular operations aimed at a certain goal or motive, represented as the object (Engeström & Miettinen 1999). To give an example from education, the teacher (subject) uses a Think-Pair-Share exercise (tool) in order to help her students achieve certain learning objectives (object).

Engeström (1999) viewed early versions of activity theory as lacking the potential to represent actions as elements of a collective activity system. Activity theory, according to Engeström (2001) can best be understood in light of five key principles: 1) the prime unit of analysis is a collective object-oriented activity system mediated through the use of tools; 2) activity systems are multivoiced; 3) activity systems have historicity; 4) contradictions are central to transformation and development; and, 5) long term expansive cycles of transformation are possible in activity systems. In this discussion, the central principles include the (1) object-oriented activity system mediated through the use of tools and (2) the inherent contradictions. I will expand upon those two principles to foreground the findings and justify the choice of activity theory as the analytical framework.

3.2 *Activity system as prime unit of analysis*

A key principle to activity theory specifies that a specific object-oriented activity system must be the prime unit of analysis. The minimum core components for an activity system must include subject, object, mediating tools, rules, community and division of labor, represented by Engeström's Triangles (Cole & Engeström 1993; Engeström 1987) (see Figure 1).

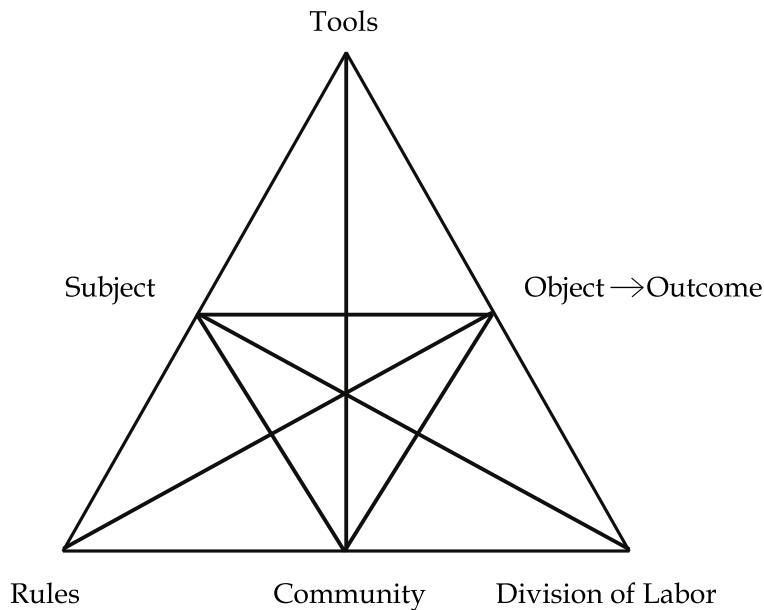


Figure 1. Engeström’s Triangles (Engeström 1987: 78; reprinted with permission).

Modeling the activity system (see Figure 2) requires identifying the elements that constitute the various components of the activity system. For example, the tools component in the activity systems of this study includes teacher knowledge, teaching materials, assessment instruments, etc. This article will only touch upon subject, object and mediating tools, and thus those components and relevant elements will be extrapolated here.

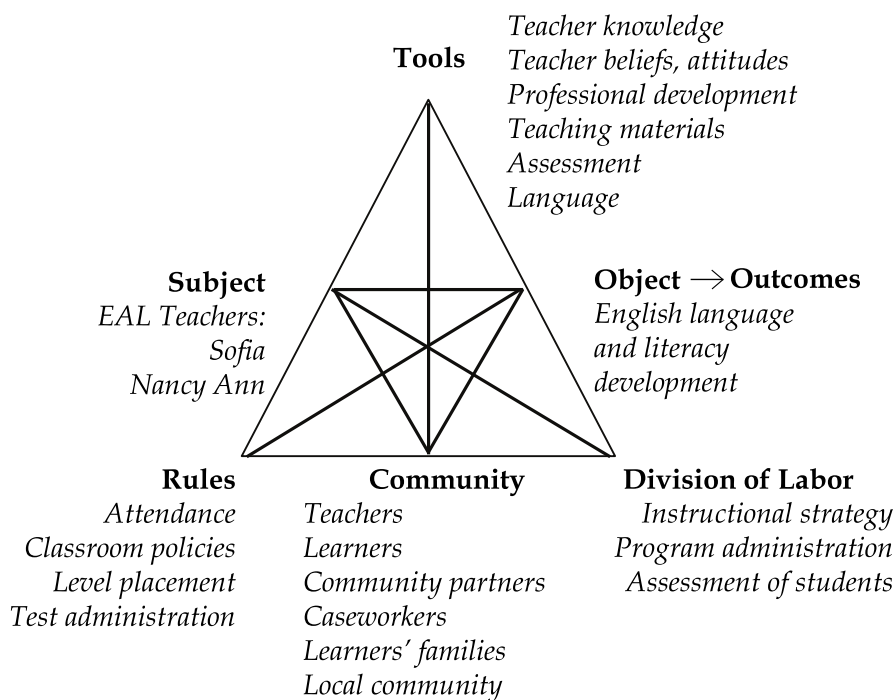


Figure 2. Modeling the activity system of the observed EAL classes.

In an activity system, the *subject* component is the doer of the action or the actor in the activity system. Analysis of the activity system takes place from the point of view of this individual or group. In other words, given the activity system of a language classroom, if the analysis is exploring what the teacher does in the classroom, the teacher would be the subject.

The *object* component of the activity system can be conceived of as that which the activity system is acting upon or toward which it is directed. By extension, there is an *outcome* component in the activity system that is generally conceived of as the goal (motive) of the activity system. As the activity acts upon the object, the aim is transformation of or within that object such that the outcome is reached (e.g., literacy development).

The *tools* comprise an integral component in the transformation of the object toward reaching the outcome. The elements that make up the tools component may be physical or material, such as textbooks, assessments and handouts; however, they may also include psychological or cognitive artifacts, such as language, beliefs, knowledge, and procedures. Tools either help or hinder the subject in carrying out the actions, depending on their availability, their usefulness for certain applications or their effect on the interactions between the subject and object.

3.3 Contradictions

Another key principle of activity theory is the essential function of contradictions as catalysts for transformation within the activity system. “Contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems” that can lead to both conflicts and innovations (Engeström 2001: 137). They arise with the evolution of an activity system and the resultant interactions among components within the activity system. For example, they may occur with the introduction of a more advanced tool to the activity system, such as technology in the classroom, which *initially* may complicate the activity or limit the capacity of teachers or students to carry out tasks.

Contradictions are a critical tenet to activity theory and their centrality speaks to the inherent nature of conflict, contradiction, and tension in human activity. The opportunities for development that exist when contradictions are identified support the notion that they do not reflect failure in a system and should not be seen as obstacles or signs of weakness. Rather, they can be seen as the “illuminative hinges through which participants in an activity can reflect on their activity system’s developmental trajectory and understand its dynamics” (Foot 2001: 12). It is the power of activity theory to acknowledge the dynamic nature of activity systems that makes this analytical tool ideal for the present study. Engeström identifies and explains four levels of contradiction within an activity system. For the purposes of this chapter, only secondary level contradictions are described below as the basis for analysis of the activity systems in this discussion.

A level two or *secondary* contradiction is a tension that arises between two interacting components of the activity system, such as subject and tool, subject and community or community and rules. In a study of a Korean EFL teacher, Kim (2011) discovered tensions between the subject (the EFL instructor) and the

community (her students) related to the implementation of communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches in the classroom. The instructor (subject) struggled to negotiate national curricular reform (rule), which required her to implement CLT (tool) in her classes, and her students' views (community) that these activities were irrelevant for their success on the high stakes national exams (outcomes). Relationships within an activity system are naturally complicated, but identifying inherent contradictions can lead to resolution and subsequent transformations aimed at improving upon a given activity system.

4 Study design

This qualitative ethnographic case study design guided by activity theory aims to provide a holistic view of the situated practice of two community-based LESLLA teachers. The investigation uncovered some of the context-dependent relationships and tensions that shape both their professional knowledge and practice. This discussion specifically highlights the tension present when the subject lacks access to a key tool for successful action toward an objective.

4.1 Participants

Sofia and Nancy Ann¹ are English language teachers in adult community-based programs in the United States. Sofia is a career teacher with over two decades of teaching experience in the EAL context, however her experience with LESLLA learners only extends back five years. Nancy Ann is a retired nurse who later joined the teaching force after receiving a BA TESOL. While they have varying levels of general teaching experience, they have the same amount (five years) of specific experience related to teaching LESLLA learners. Their students are primarily refugee populations from various countries in Africa and Asia.

4.2 Data collection

Data was collected over the course of one year. The multiple sources of data for this study include 20 in-class observations per teacher, semi-structured interviews and relevant documents, including teaching materials and teachers' reflective writing. The goals for the *observations* in this case study included describing the phenomenon in its natural setting and understanding the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants. I observed the 80-minute EAL classes, compiled field notes and memos about the classroom activity (e.g., teacher behaviors, student behaviors, interactions, materials, topics, etc.) that contributed to a deeper understanding of the teachers' practices. I was a nonparticipant observer, thereby taking no role in the class beyond observer.

Throughout and following the period of observation, I conducted semi-structured *interviews* with the teachers to explore their classroom decisions, gain their perspectives on my interpretations, and determine which challenges they identified in their practice within this context. Activity theory, as a research tool, aims to not only uncover challenges, but transform the activity system to address the tensions. Consequently, our discussions often served to generate ideas that might target the tensions the teachers were experiencing in their work.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me to influence the general direction with some guiding questions, but I maintained flexibility to add follow-up questions to the participants' responses and to allow for elaborate conversational responses from the participants.

Documents were analyzed to give further information about teachers' training and their classroom practices. From the classroom context, the documents included materials used by the teacher for instructional and assessment purposes, as well as participants' written reflections about their classroom practices and beliefs about teaching LESLLA learners.

4.3 *Data analysis*

Data analysis happened concurrently with data collection throughout the course of the study. Data collection ended when the on-going analysis indicated that new themes ceased to emerge (Merriam 2009). In this study, the themes emerged following a focus on the interactions between the components of the activity systems (e.g., the teacher (subject) interacting with the textbooks (tools) as a means of accomplishing the goal of developing students' literacy (object)). A theme would be represented by the predominant contradiction between components (e.g., a secondary contradiction between the teacher's perceived needs relative to teaching materials and the reality of what teaching materials are available). The observational data (field notes) were coded according to the activity theory schemes that targeted components of the activity system. First, the activity system was decomposed to identify the make-up of each component (i.e., subject, tools, community, rules, etc.). For example, all elements that comprise the tools component were identified (e.g., teaching materials, assessments, students' background knowledge, etc.). Next the activity system was coded to reflect the interacting components (i.e., the code S-T marked a relationship between a teacher (subject) and the tools she implemented, such as texts, handouts, and assessments). These relationships were then investigated for contradictions, which served as the central themes in the study (Merriam 2009). An example contradiction existed in the relationship between the teacher (subject) and the available teaching materials (tool). In the perspective of the teachers, there was a distinct lack of level-appropriate texts for literacy level learners, which subsequently demanded that teachers constantly adapt or create materials. The interview data was organized into existing themes uncovered through the activity theoretical analysis of the observational data. Some new themes were added to accommodate themes that did not emerge during the observations. For example, it was during the interviews that professional development emerged as an important tool in the activity system. The relationship between the teachers and the professional development tool is the central focus of this article. Finally, the classroom documents were considered or referred to when reflecting upon the teachers' classroom practices.

5 Findings

5.1 Modeling the instructional activity systems

Sofia and Nancy Ann are the *subjects* of their respective activity systems, and as such, the activity systems within which they operate are considered from their perspectives. The objects and tools of the two activity systems are quite similar and therefore are described jointly. The *object* (objective) for each activity system can be labeled as English language and literacy development. The outcomes vary slightly from one activity system to the next as they are shaped by the teachers' beliefs about what their learners' goals are, what their aim should be according to their respective programs, and, ultimately, what they think will best serve their learners in the real world. Underlying both activity systems is a desire to empower learners through increased access to a print literate society and increased confidence during interactions with the English-speaking world.

The *tools* within each activity system present the greatest complexity for this model. There are both cognitive and physical tools within each activity system. The cognitive tools include the teachers' knowledge, beliefs and attitudes that shape their decision making in the classroom. Physical tools include the texts and materials that the teachers use to mediate their instruction, as well as in-class assessments and choice of learning activities. Professional learning opportunities also serve as important tools in each activity system, guiding teachers' decision-making processes and providing resources for personal and professional development.

5.2 Contradictions in the activity systems

In exploring the two activity systems, I uncovered several noteworthy relationships between components of each activity system. Some of the interactions between components in these relationships presented tensions or contradictions, the majority of which were at the secondary level (i.e., between two components within one activity system). This discussion centers on the tension between the teachers (as subjects of their activity systems) and their access to professional learning opportunities (tools).

5.2.1 Absence of professional learning opportunities as a key tension

One of the greatest tensions present in the activity system of each teacher existed at the level of access to professional learning opportunities, which would ideally serve as an effective mediational tool and resource for the teaching activity. Professional learning communities hinge on the availability of opportunities for collaboration among members of a community of practice. Collaboration within a program can greatly enhance teacher learning and professional development and conversely, the absence of opportunities for collaboration can lead to feelings of isolation, lack of power and frustration – all of which surfaced in conversations with Sofia and to a lesser degree, with Nancy Ann.

Nancy Ann's reflections on collaborative professional learning. In her teaching context, Nancy Ann co-taught a class with another instructor. Her co-instructor

taught for the first hour of class, focusing on life skills (e.g., family, shopping, transportation). Being very eager to learn, get new ideas and improve her own practice, Nancy Ann always observed her colleague during the first hour. She told me, “I like to import information and techniques from other teachers and have done so shamelessly.” During the second hour of this class, Nancy Ann shifted the learners’ focus to developing early literacy skills using *Sam and Pat* as her core text. The *Sam and Pat* series relies on a decodable text and controlled vocabulary so that learners can decode using their phonics skills and background knowledge about previously encountered vocabulary. Nancy Ann also attributed much of her teacher development to her student teaching, which afforded her the opportunity to work with a mentor teacher who had extensive LESLLA teaching experience.

Nancy Ann’s feelings about the value of collaboration evolved alongside her identity as a teacher. I asked Nancy Ann what her suggestion for professional development might look like. Her answer perhaps reflects her uncertainty with what might be possible, but she did express a desire to have more time for collaboration.

Well, for me right now ... within the school would be good - to hear from other teachers in the school cause they’d be able to give me ideas based on their knowledge of the same population. So that would be really helpful. And, so they understand the population and they understand ... the constraints ... of the, um, program and they have some knowledge of the materials that are available at the school. And so I think that would be really helpful on a regular basis. Maybe even just once a month. Ya know? Get together ...

But, because the way things are scheduled ... so that there is no extra time ... there is none. None of the teachers have any prep time. There’s also no time between classes. She ends, I start. So, if we just had a block of time that was teacher time, to get together even just once a month, for an hour and everyone could get together and have ... I mean it would have to be structured at first, or probably always ... and have the topics that we’re going to discuss. Ok, *What are some the new things that have worked for you? What are some problems? Could someone help solve those?*

There are some people that have really so much experience that could be such good resources but you never get to sit down with them. We’re always rushing off to everybody else’s second job.

In addition to wanting to ‘bounce ideas off one another’ for the benefit of her practice, she also noted the value that collaboration would have for the learners. She recounted a story about a student in her literacy level class who made great gains between starting the program as a newcomer and moving out of her class into the next literacy level with another instructor. When this student moved into the next instructor’s level one class, there was a breakdown for the student.

We were pretty tight to the book and the next class, which was [Mike²] ... and he’s a fine teacher, but his way is very different and he doesn’t coordinate curriculum with anybody else. So when they got in there, they

couldn't figure out what the program was, let alone learn - too disconnected.

In this light, she saw the value in collaboration as a tool to support student movement through the program. She noted that different teaching styles may result in students being conditioned for 'doing school' in one way, only to be unprepared for the ways of 'doing school' in another classroom with another teacher.

Sofia's reflections on collaborative professional learning. In the case of Nancy Ann, the lack of collaboration presented a tension because of the impact she believes it could have on the students' ability to navigate through the program successfully. Sofia echoes this concern and additionally notes the need for more collaboration as a catalyst for teacher development and curriculum alignment.

I would love to have some time to collaborate with my colleagues and find out what they are doing in their classes for so many obvious reasons. It would allow us to benefit from different techniques that we use. We could talk about the progress of individual students and move them when we feel they are ready. We could make sure that we're not duplicating curriculum.

She additionally noted the isolation that the teachers are experiencing in the program during several of our conversations. *Insufficient time* appeared to be one of the greatest predictors for the lack of interaction between teachers.

I don't know about the other teachers who have lunches scheduled at a different time, but from what I have heard, few of them have the time to sit and relax and talk during their lunch. Most are entering attendance, planning classes, talking with students, or making copies.

According to Sofia, the lack of interaction between teachers negatively impacts the students because there is no discussion of aligning curriculum across levels and within levels. She shares, "as far as curriculum for the classes, it used to be that the teachers met regularly and we ... and we had teams and stuff like that. The program is so disjointed now that nobody ever sees each other anymore." When I asked her about the other literacy level teachers in the program, she told me that neither of them has an ESL teaching background. In terms of what they are doing in their classes, she states, "I have absolutely no communication with them, I have *no* idea what they are doing in their classes." For Sofia, this is a problem because she sees students in the program moving within levels from one school term to the next, and she is concerned about the continued support they get for the gains she reports they made in her class.

Underlying Sofia's comments about the lack of collaboration was a simple desire to create a system of exchange among the teachers. Given the limited available materials for this learner population and the absence of an active professional learning community in this program, it was not surprising that Sofia craved interaction with her colleagues to gain access to ideas and resources.

We're so isolated that nobody has any idea what anybody else is doing. There's no sharing of materials. It's just and um, so many other things that

you need for literacy levels, you know ... cutting up words, mounting to different colors ... and it just takes so much time and no one has the time to do it and if someone does have time, then only that person has access to that. There's just no sharing of information.

One can sense in her words that there is a level of anger or resentment about her isolation. The lack of opportunity for collaboration seems to not only be affecting her sense of place in the program but also her sense of camaraderie with her colleagues. Perhaps, more accurately, she is simply upset to see what she perceives to be a deterioration of this program that she has belonged to for so long. She later shared, "It's very depressing to see the direction things are going. ... There's absolutely no working together or, ya know, looking at curriculum as a step by step kind of thing ... because there's no communication."

As far as workshops are concerned, Sofia said, "I think I have attended one professional development workshop that I felt was beneficial. Most have been a waste of my time." She expressed her frustration at the outside 'expert' being invited in to share information with her that she can find no use for when working with her current learner populations.

They organize these options for professional development. Ok, you're gonna pretend to teach? Why not actually observe people teaching in the classroom and then talk about what's working and why. I would love to see what others are doing. I would love to see ... rather than having someone come in who has no idea what I do in my classroom.

She noted how the teachers could grow from having the opportunity to observe one another, if they were simply given the chance to rotate out of their regularly scheduled classes. "It would be so beneficial. We all have such different teaching styles."

In the absence of well-established professional learning opportunities within the actual school, Sofia seeks professional development elsewhere. She notes that her "only opportunities for growth come from when [she goes] to conferences." The school district does provide paid leave to contract teachers (not hourly teachers) to take advantage of professional development opportunities, so Sofia does this as often as she can. She makes a point of applying early for the time off to attend conferences, such as the annual TESOL Convention. Although she doesn't receive additional financial support, she enjoys the chance to recharge a bit, see what people are doing and bring ideas back to try out in the classes.

However, conferences, like one-shot workshops run the risk of inspiring teachers momentarily, only to have teachers return to their teaching context and resort to their 'business as usual'. Sofia elaborated on a 'fabulous presentation' about using dictation in the classroom. Right after she told me about the presentation, she said,

That's something that I didn't do enough and I came back and I started doing it and of course, that went out the window with ... [laughs] ... And of course, that didn't last long. You get new ideas and it's inspiring and then you go on to something else. And yeah, it's always inspiring to go watch someone else and you think, oh yea, I should try that.

This 'loss of inspiration' can be attributed to lack of synergy in the program. Teachers thrive, as do all social beings, in a community. In early interviews, I anticipated the discussions to center on classroom practices for effective early literacy instruction, however the tension between the teachers' ability to effect change toward the desired outcome and their inability to access professional learning opportunities so colored most of our conversations that it presented itself as a dominating contradiction in their activity systems.

5.3 Theorizing practice to create professional learning

As noted in the previous section, Nancy Ann valued the chance to observe other teachers. She said that she learned a lot from debriefing with her mentor teacher after each lesson, "especially when I felt like my class was not the most successful." She also appreciated observing the co-instructor of her class to see "his techniques for teaching the alphabet and combining sounds." She said they often debriefed their lessons to discuss what did and did not work from day to day. For Nancy Ann, the 'practical' is where she is comfortable. She finds it challenging to make connections between theory and practice.

I gotta say, in all the times that, even in my nursing career, and probably now, when you go to conferences you hear *theory theory, theory, theory, theory* and I think everybody would like to hear *practice*, all the practical little tips. Like somebody could say this is how I do it and it really worked for me because ... and then you can say, well you know that's really neat and I'm going take this and this and this from what you said and try it out but when you're way up here [holds hand above head] theorizing, it's too big a leap. It's too big a leap for people that are more concerned with day-to-day practice.

I asked her how she attempts to connect the two, because I have witnessed her implementing some very effective strategies in the class. She replied,

I think there's a disconnect, I think there is a disconnect and that's where it becomes you know, it becomes more stressful cause you think, *ok I understand this theory but how does it apply to me or how can I apply the benefits of this theory?* Just show me a technique that you use so I can steal it. Something like that ... just, you know, I'm a concrete thinker.

She talked about a "little sliding thing" that her colleague, Evan³ used to help students work on slides and blending. Nancy Ann described a 3x5 card with a word family (e.g., -an, -at, -ap) written on it and a hole cut out in place of the initial (or final) letter. Evan employed a long vertical strip with individual letters that would interact with the word family combinations (e.g., 'm', 'b', 's'). He moved the consonant strip up and down and the students read the words aloud as they were formed (e.g., man, bat, sap). Nancy Ann said that because "it's simple and catchy" the students liked it and were not confused by the changing consonants. Nancy Ann's penchant for the practical could enhance her capacity to theorize practice, if she had more opportunities to investigate the connections between theory and practice with colleagues.

Sofia tends to display more interest in theories and wants to know what is being developed in the field for work in the LESLLA context. As a career teacher, teaching shapes her identity in many ways, and she takes pride in her profession. In recent years, her teaching context has changed to reflect the new student populations and she now finds herself adapting to teach LESLLA learners after three decades of teaching literate learners only. This shift has presented her with new challenges and opportunities for growth.

I just find it really fascinating and I know, uh, I know I could do a whole lot better if I had some time to think about what I do. I've just been doing literacy, you know, this if my fourth year and I just think I've learned so much through doing it and for me, you know, having students be able to identify a word, it's really important ... and *first* and *last*. It's really important and it's [teaching concept of 'first' and 'last'] something that I just started working on this year and as I continue to do this I learn more.

In discussions about what she believes works with this learner population, it is apparent that what she knows and does is grounded in her own explorations into the theories and practices for teaching literacy. Sofia really enjoys puzzling over the best approaches to develop literacy skills in her class. She often shows a very complicated, if not scattered, reflective process that demonstrates her commitment to 'figuring it out' and theorizing her practice as best she can on her own. Sofia is working through a reconceptualization of her practical and pedagogical knowledge, which is influenced by her beliefs about what the students can and should be able to do. Her observation that she has to focus on such basics as *first* and *last* shows that she is reconsidering what is required of her as a teacher in this context. She encountered tensions in her work and upon reflection, realized that one approach for addressing this challenge was to teach *first* and *last* to help her students identify first and last sounds, first and last letters, first and last words, etc. Her expectations about how quickly they should develop certain skills or vocabulary are likely tied to her years of experience teaching higher level ELLs, but these expectations are evolving with her continued practice in this context. She attends to what developments they are making; she makes note of their progress and pays attention to social factors that impact their learning. She is concerned for the support they receive in other classes, and is able to relate their challenges to her own language learning experiences.

In noting that Sofia identified the contradictions in her own activity system and created solutions to address them, I am hoping to highlight the role of tensions as catalysts for change in a system. Sofia was not intending to apply an activity theoretical lens to analyze her teaching - she was simply reflecting on her practice. Without exploring human practices to uncover what is *not* working, we are not challenged to create approaches that do work. Providing the chance to engage in lucrative professional learning opportunities increases the likelihood that teachers will reflect on their practice, identify contradictions, generate solutions with colleagues and experiment with alternative approaches.

6 Discussion and conclusion

The support for teacher collaboration and establishing communities of practice in educational settings is strong (Wilson & Berne 1999; Vinogradov 2013). This discussion of the apparent tension in the activity of teaching when access to professional learning opportunities are limited is only one of myriad tensions experienced by LESLLA teachers. The perspectives of Sonia and Nancy Ann point to the likely benefits of cultivating professional learning communities within the adult education program. First, the morale can be low when teachers feel isolated and coming together as a community helps teachers overcome the 'struggle for voice' (Britzman 2003). Sofia and Nancy Ann recounted on several occasions that they would benefit professionally and socially from collaborative, professional learning opportunities. Nancy, being a less-experienced teacher would further be able to find the confidence to move between the practical and the theoretical if she had colleagues serving as models in the negotiation between theory and practice.

Secondly, collaborative approaches to professional learning, such as peer observations, lesson study, and study circles are immediately accessible by the teachers because they are based in their teaching context and reflect the learner populations with which they are working. They can discuss cases related to students they share and problem solve based on collective experiences. Tasker (2011: 204) notes that "a teacher-directed collaborative professional development activity focuses the teachers' attention on gaps in their students' learning by creating a mediational space that encourages sustained dialogic interaction about student learning issues that are central to teachers' everyday teaching practice". Professional learning opportunities for teachers should, above all, be relevant and accessible to the teachers.

Finally, teacher-directed approaches to professional development enable teachers to "move beyond being not only consumers of top-down expert knowledge, but also producers of school-based, self-directed knowledge by adopting a 'researcher' lens" (Tasker 2011: 204). Within the LESLLA context, this is particularly important because new, relevant theories of second language acquisition and L2 pedagogy for work with LESLLA learners are still emerging and evolving. Contributions from practitioners who jointly theorize practice with peers are necessary to move the field forward.

Transforming practice is not straightforward and may be particularly challenging for career teachers who have been teaching and learning within one context for years and now find themselves in a starkly different context. Enabling teachers to participate in professional communities that promote risk taking is essential for teacher development (Putnam & Borko 2000). Perhaps one of the most generous contributions a program administrator can provide for the professional development of teachers is time. In a study on how adult education teachers changed over time, Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon & Rowe (2003) found that the most significant factors at the institutional level were teachers' access to benefits and preparation time. Succeeding these factors slightly in significance, but still emerging as important determiners of change, were teachers' access to paid professional development time and opportunities for collaboration with peers.

As noted by Vinogradov (2013), LESLLA teachers must develop a knowledge base that encompasses knowledge about adult learning, language and language acquisition, teaching, and the immigrant and refugee experience. Weaving opportunities for collaborative professional learning into the LESLLA teaching domain will only enhance the educational experience for the LESLLA learners and empower the LESLLA teachers as they join in the co-construction of new knowledge for work in this context.

The use of activity theory as an analytical framework allowed for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of these LESLLA teachers. The strength of activity theory is multi-faceted. As a research tool in educational settings, activity theory creates a space to consider the value of relationships in teaching and learning environments, as well as the critical and transformative power in identifying and addressing inherent tensions within those relationships. As the research agenda in the LESLLA context continues to evolve, activity theory can serve as a useful, accessible tool for researchers and teachers exploring classroom practice.

Endnotes

¹ Sofia and Nancy Ann are pseudonyms.

² Mike is a pseudonym for another teacher who teaches Literacy and Level One ESL classes.

³ Evan is a pseudonym for another teacher who teaches literacy and low-beginner level classes.

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