

## A Community of Practice in Teacher Education: Insights and Perceptions

Margarita Jimenez-Silva  
*Arizona State University*

Kate Olson  
*Vassar College*

Grounded in the construct of community of practice, the authors discuss the Teacher-Learner Community (TLC), where the goal is to support the development of pre-service teachers' understanding of culture, community, and background in learning. Insights and perceptions of pre-service teachers were gathered after implementing a TLC designed to prepare them to work with English language learners (ELLs). Sharing these insights and perceptions, the authors discuss TLC's potential role in influencing pre-service teachers' beliefs and understanding of ELLs.

Recognizing that “we live in a world that extends beyond our front door or national borders,” (Hamilton & Clandinin, 2010) and that future teachers need to be provided opportunities to think about and discuss the implications of this idea, the authors present the idea of the Teacher-Learner Community (TLC) as one candidate for the organization and practice of a course in teacher education on cultural and linguistic diversity and specifically addressing how to teach students learning English as a second language. In the context of the United States, students learning English as a second language are currently labeled as English language learners (ELLs). ELLs may be students who have immigrated to the US or may have been born in the US but raised in a home in which the primary language was a language other than English. The issue of how to prepare teachers who may not share the same linguistic or cultural background as their students also has implications for teacher preparation programs in university settings. The conceptual model of TLCs—grounded in the construct of community of practice—for organizing learning, thought, and action in teacher education has the possibility of impacting the course content and manner in which that content is taught.

In this paper, we explore how or whether participation in TLCs enabled pre-service teachers to begin to use the theories learned in the teacher education program in their thinking about their future classroom practices with ELLs. The authors examine pre-service teachers' written work, course evaluations, and testimonies regarding a teacher education course to see the usefulness of the TLC pedagogical approach to learning in teacher education, particularly in classes focused on cultural and linguistic diversity. The data presented are not offered as grounds for making strong claims about the effectiveness of using TLCs in transforming pre-service teachers' understanding of issues of cultural and linguistic diversity, since there are limitations that include the implications of the authors as instructors of the course. Rather, we present this study to begin a conversation about how to organize and instruct classes in cultural and linguistic diversity in

teacher education. To do this, we illustrate the kinds of work and testimony provided by our pre-service teachers. Further studies are necessary to measure both baseline and longitudinal outcomes of such an organization of learning on teachers' knowledge, learning, and eventually their practice with ELLs that reflect their understanding that we live in a world that extends beyond our own front doors.

The results of a preliminary study that we conducted of two sections of our own course in cultural diversity are discussed in this paper to advance the conversation about how to organize teacher education courses related to the instruction of ELLs. The course was developed and implemented by the authors in a large public university in a metropolitan area in the southwest of the United States as a result of a state mandate in 2005 that required all teachers take a course to prepare them to teach ELLs. Throughout the United States, school systems are struggling with how to best meet the social and academic needs of students who are learning English as a second language. Furthermore, addressing the needs of students learning a second language is a critical issue in any country whose school-age population includes bilingual or multilingual students (Tollefson, 2002). Language policies in schools and the various effects of such policies have been studied by scholars in various countries, including Canada (Burnaby, 1997; 2002), Australia (Moore, 2002), India (Sonntag, 2002), South Africa (Smit, 1997) and Korea (Jung & Norton, 2002).

A persistent problem of practice in teacher education in the US is that teachers continue to teach as they were taught in schools, making educational reform or change an ephemeral idea that is difficult to implement and even harder to sustain (Cuban, 1993; Richardson, 1996; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The endurance of traditional, back-to-basics, and lecture-style instruction is especially true for students whose cultural and linguistic background is different from that of the majority culture in schools and in the larger community (Gutiérrez, 2000; Reyes, 1992; Zeichner, 1996, 2003). The experiences of teaching and learning

in a teacher education program should model and foreshadow the powerful teaching and learning practices that graduates could employ with school children. The primary goal of the TLC in our course was to help teachers see beyond their own experiences and model a sociocultural environment that enhances teacher and student interactions.

### Theoretical and Empirical Roots of the Teacher-Learner Community

There are practical and theoretical reasons for creating, cultivating, and purposefully discussing the TLC as signature pedagogy (Golde, 2007) in our course. The goal of TLCs was to meld the theory/practice divide by grounding instruction in the theoretical construct of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Lave, 2001; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) to facilitate student learning and development. In addition, the teacher education course's use of the epistemology of case study research (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994) allowed pre-service teachers to begin to bridge the gap between theory and practice so that the inquiry projects were likely to help them understand the importance and value that each ELL student's history, community, family and culture have in teaching and learning in classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

### Community of Practice Theory

The construct of community of practice is grounded in sociocultural theories of learning and development that contend that all human development is founded upon social interaction in cultural/historical practices that are mediated by the use of cultural artifacts, tools, and signs. (Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). Since language is the preeminent socializing tool, it is fundamental in learning and development (Gutiérrez, 2002; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984) and is the means by which individuals make meaning of material and ideational artifacts in society (Cole, 1996; Moll, 2000; Ochs, 1988). However, the context and activity in which language mediation occurs is equally important in learning and development (Duranti & Goodwin, 1992; Rogoff, 2003). As Engeström (1987), Leont'ev (1981), and Vygotsky (1978) assert, the relation between individuals and the material world happens in situated, cultural activities. Only through participation and collaboration with others in cultural activities and practices does human social and cognitive development occur (Rogoff, 2003; Wertsch, 1991). Therefore, sociocultural theories of learning place language, culture and, therefore, community front and center in

the development process, which makes them ideal organizing principles in teacher courses related to ELLs.

By dedicating a portion of our instruction on inquiring and learning about both the pre-service teachers' and ELLs' cultural practices in TLCs and in schools, pre-service teachers directly participate in activities that may allow them both to use language and to acquire insight into the following: (1) how important culture and community are in learning and development, (2) how to cultivate TLCs in the classroom, (3) how to make the content meaningful and relevant to students, and (4) how to use students' cultural and linguistic skills and capabilities as a scaffold in classroom practice. By acquiring these insights, pre-service teachers may be better able to "step out of national silos, single disciplines, and taken-for-granted understandings" (Hamilton & Clandinin, 2010, p. 1227) within their classrooms.

In community of practice theory derived from the sociocultural perspective, it is argued that people construct and develop their identities and understanding through their active participation and engagement with others in cultural practices that are situated in a particular social communities, such as in a teacher education course or in a K-12 classroom (Lave & Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Lave, 2001). As members of a community of practice interact, share, and participate in a particular cultural practice over time, they develop their understanding about the practice, about who they are, and about what they know in relation to the community and its goals. According to Wenger (1998), there are three forms of "belonging" to a community of practice that shape an individual's learning and development: *engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment*. Individuals develop their sense of belonging and *alignment* to a community of practice and its way of thinking and doing through their active engagement in the cultural practice (Wenger, 1998).

Wenger's (1998) and Wenger and Lave's (2001) notion of legitimate peripheral participation is essential to the three modes of belonging to a community of practice. Through collaboration and active *engagement* in a community of practice, members are able to *imagine* themselves, their roles, and their future in the practice as they move from peripheral to full participation, or from novice to expert, in making meaning of the tools, concepts, and processes that co-construct and cultivate the practice (Rogoff, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). With advanced levels of participation, participants' identities and understandings become increasingly *aligned* to the practice, as they become more skilled in their knowledge of the practice.

We acknowledge that issues of power, motivation, and personality inherent in any situated context may

affect the type and amount of participation in the community (Fenwick, 2000; Neiwolny & Wilson, 2009) and, therefore, influence student learning and development. However, we deliberately worked to address these issues in the community by ensuring that we provided the pre-service teachers with multiple and varying opportunities to collaborate and make meaning of the content and the TLC with each other and with the group as a whole. In this way, there were multiple contexts and people with whom to interact in the TLC, which allowed more malleable and permeable social structures in which to enable and encourage participation. As a result, we hope that as faculty and pre-service teachers interacted, collaborated, and negotiated their understanding of ELLs, language, culture, and learning in TLCs, the pre-service teachers would be socialized into understandings and dispositions that support cultivating a community of practice in their future classrooms. In addition, they would be more likely to use methods of inquiry to learn about ELLs' sociocultural and academic knowledge to determine how best to differentiate instruction to meet students' needs. Understanding how these communities materialize internationally is crucial, and our intention in this paper is to shed light on the pedagogy used to create such a community within a pre-service teacher education course in the US.

### **Communities of Practice in Pre-Service Teacher Education**

While some would argue that innovative pedagogical and instructional approaches can be effective in helping prepare teachers for working with diverse populations (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Sleeter, Torres & Laughlin, 2004; Taylor & Sobel, 2001), few studies have described the specific organization and practices that prepare pre-service teachers to work specifically with ELLs. Most of the literature centers on the particular personal and professional knowledge pre-service and in-service teachers, as well as teacher educators, should have to teach student populations with diverse cultural and linguistic needs (Commins & Miramontes, 2006; Grant & Gillette, 2006; Lucas, Villegas, & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008).

There is literature that illuminates the benefits of organizing learning in teacher education around the communities of practice model in the US, including several studies that place emphasis on assisting pre-service teachers' learning of a specific content area and increasing self-efficacy for teaching that content (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Perry, Walton, & Calder, 1999); however, none of this research specifically addresses ELLs. Other research examined the organization of practicum courses, or

student teaching experiences, in pre-service teacher education around the community of practice model and the benefits it provided in helping pre-service teachers understand the relationship of theory in practice (Beck & Kosnick, 2001; Sim, 2006; Sutherland, Scanlon, & Sperring, 2005). Only one study uncovered in our literature review specifically addressed issues of cultural and linguistic diversity using a community of practice approach in teacher education in the US. In this study, Au (2002) discussed the roles of teachers' ethnicity and community membership within a Hawaiian community.

The studies mentioned previously illustrate that meaningful opportunities to develop students' understanding of content and increasing pre-service teachers' confidence in their own abilities to teach all students is possible when there are courses that allow the students to reflect and participate actively in the construction of their own understanding on educative issues within a community of practice model of learning, whether related to particular subject matter or to student teaching experiences. While the research did not specifically address communities of practice in courses on cultural and linguistic diversity, we can infer from them that both the organization and the implementation of teacher education courses do matter in providing the context of safety, trust, and care necessary to facilitate the development of pre-service teachers' knowledge of, and confidence to teach, ELLs. This article attempts to begin to develop such a foundation for cultural and linguistic diversity courses.

### **Method of Study of Teacher-Learner Communities**

For this study, we collected data using a mixed-methods approach in efforts to understand how or whether participation in TLCs enabled pre-service teachers to use the theories learned in the teacher education program in their thinking about their future classroom practices with ELLs. Although there is no single definition of mixed methods research, it is "generally speaking, an approach to knowledge (theory and practice) that attempts to consider multiple viewpoints, perspectives, positions, and standpoints" (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007, p. 113). Yin (2006) discusses the value of using mixed methods research to broaden and strengthen a study.

For the purposes of this study, we focused on two TLC classes in which the authors implemented the pedagogical model. These two TLC courses consisted of 33 pre-service teachers in total (12 in one course section and 21 in the other section). The ethnicity and gender of the 33 pre-service teachers across the two sections consisted of 19 white female students, nine white male students, four Latina female students, and one African American female student. The four Latina

students identified themselves as being bilingual, although we did not ask about or assess their proficiency in each language. The other 29 participants identified themselves as monolingual English-speakers. The participants' demographics reflected the general demographics of the teacher education program, with 90% of the students between the ages of 22 and 26. As the researchers and instructors of these classes, our own demographic information is relevant. The first author is U.S.-born to Mexican immigrants and spoke Spanish as her first language, acquiring English when she entered the U.S. school system. The second author is Caucasian and spoke English as her first language, later learning Spanish through coursework and study abroad experiences in secondary schools and university settings.

Pre-service teachers in the participants' education program are required to complete 56 semester hours of general education courses and then enter the Professional Teacher Preparation Program (PTPP) in which they must complete an additional 58 semester hours of education courses, including 16 semester hours of student teaching. The course in which the TLCs were implemented was a required semester-long course, usually taken in the second semester of the PTPP, and covered topics such as language acquisition theories, laws, and policies affecting the instruction of ELLs, strategies for teaching ELLs, and assessment of ELLs. Within the PTPP, pre-service teachers must also complete three rotations of field experience in which the pre-service teachers are placed in K-8 classrooms. Two of those rotations must include low-income schools, as defined by the state department of education. Although there are no mandates requiring pre-service teachers to work with students who are culturally and linguistically diverse, given the location of the university in a metropolitan area of the southwestern United States, the vast majority of pre-service teachers work with ELLs. Furthermore, the pre-service teachers in the PTPP are placed in schools in a certain geographic area where the majority of the ELLs in those schools are native Spanish-speakers.

In this study, the research question we wanted to explore was, "How or whether participation in TLCs enabled pre-service teachers to begin to use the theories learned in the teacher education program in their thinking about their future classroom practices with ELLs?"

### Data Collection

Following the tradition of mixed methods research to address the research question, we collected three types of data to see if there was any reported development in the pre-service teachers' understanding of ELLs and the organization of classroom practice. First, we collected 33 written reflections from the pre-

service teachers' case study papers. The reflections were based on Wenger and Lave's (2001) notion of learning and development through participation and interaction in a community of practice. In particular, the reflection section of the paper asked the students to reflect upon their experience conducting the inquiry project over the course of the semester and to describe what they learned. Students understood that their participation was voluntary and would not affect their grade. To protect the pre-service teachers' anonymity, all names were removed from their case study papers before analysis was conducted.

Secondly, we collected course evaluations that the university distributes electronically via email at the end of the semester to all college of education courses. These evaluations provided an anonymous measure of how the pre-service teachers evaluated the course overall that were not tied to any grade or assignment. A total of 26 pre-service teachers completed the voluntary online evaluation. From these data, we were able to collect the pre-service teachers' responses to two Likert scale questions that ranged on a scale from 1 (*least*) to 4 (*most*): (1) their evaluation of the relevance and importance of the course content to their professional development, and (2) their evaluation of the instructor overall. The online evaluations also included written responses, which were completed by 19 students.

Finally, the second author conducted two semi-structured interviews after the end of the semester with focus groups comprised of participating pre-service teachers from the two course sessions. A total of 13 pre-service teachers participated, six in one group and seven in the second group. Before posing the questions to each focus group, the interviewer ensured the pre-service teachers that their participation was voluntary by stating that they did not have to answer the questions or participate in the interview, that their responses would in no way affect their submitted grade, and that their honesty to the questions would only help the instructors improve the pedagogical organization and practice of the course for future pre-service teachers and instructors. Like the written reflection question, the questions posed were based on Wenger and Lave's (2001) notion that the pre-service teachers developed their understanding as teachers and learners of ELL students as a result of collaborating and participating in the TLC community of practice. First, the pre-service teachers were asked to indicate if they believed that they were different as a consequence of participating in the course. If the response was positive, they were asked how they were different and what they learned. The second question asked the pre-service teachers to share their thoughts about the organization of the course in general and what they would change to improve it.

As Yin (2006) has noted, the more that a single study integrates mixed methods across five procedures

(research questions, units of analysis, samples of study, instrumentation/data collection, and analytic strategies), the “more that mixed methods research, as opposed to multiple studies, is taking place” (p. 42). Therefore, beyond our use of three types of instrumentation and data collection, we also analyzed each set of data (reflections, course evaluations, and focus groups) using an integrated approach to avoid what Yin (2006) calls the danger of running parallel studies instead of one study using mixed methods.

### Data Analysis

By analyzing in circular manner, we were able to see how the pre-service teachers perceived their own development as teachers and learners of ELL students, their beliefs about the course, and their experiences and ideas about how the course and the case study project have helped to develop their understanding and sense of efficacy as teachers and learners of ELLs.

For analytic purposes, we first excised the reflections from the students’ case study papers without their names attached, cut and pasted the complete set of 19 course evaluation comments from the online system, and typed the notes taken from the interviews. Using grounded theory, each author individually read, analyzed, and conducted a line by line analysis of each set of the data to generate initial codes of the teachers’ beliefs and testimony of what they learned from their participation in the case study project and the course overall. Specifically, each author read the data to see where the pre-service teachers testified how they had changed as a teacher and learner of ELLs and how their understanding of classroom pedagogy changed as a result of participating in the TLC community of practice and the inquiry project.

Afterwards we met as a team to discuss codes and come to a consensus on core categories and their properties (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These codes were then clustered with similar responses to determine prevalence in the data. Once the patterns were established, representative segments of pre-service teachers’ reflection, evaluation, and interview data were used to illustrate the presence of particular beliefs about TLCs and the teacher education course. To do this, we engaged in the analysis of the data using a circular process in which we returned to the data various times to validate each pattern and code and then to modify or recast our ideas as part of the larger picture of TLCs. This method allows researchers the opportunity to make careful judgments about what is really meaningful and significant in the data (Patton, 1990). For example, original codes that were used in analyzing the each set of data included statements related to (1) classroom community and environment, (2) interactions with ELLs, and (3) roles as teachers of ELLs. The codes emerged

from the initial reading of the pre-service teacher reflections, course evaluations, and interview data.

### Findings

By the beginning of May 2009, two TLCs had been in practice as signature pedagogy for 15 weeks over the spring semester. In our preliminary analysis, we learned that the pre-service teachers attributed a number of benefits to their participation in the TLCs, which is discussed later. Overall, the pre-service teachers responded in an overwhelmingly positive way on the Likert scale questions in the online course evaluations. These course evaluations are standardized; therefore, the instructors had no control over the questions asked or the scales used. In the section that asked them to rate how relevant the course was to their current or future professional development, the pre-service teachers’ average score across the two sections was a 3.65 on a scale of 4 points. In addition, the pre-service teachers rated the overall instructors a 3.92 out of 4 points. These scores were both higher than what the course and instructors had been rated in previous semesters when the TLC was not the pedagogical approach used in class. The average in previous semesters had been a 3.2 for relevancy and 3.4 for overall instructors.

Although these data show that the pre-service teachers liked the course and the instructors, they did not provide insight into what the pre-service teachers attributed most to their learning and development to teach ELLs. Our analysis of the pre-service teachers’ written reflections, online written evaluations, and interviews showed that the pre-service teachers testified that their participation in the TLCs and the experience of collaborating on case study projects in a deliberate community of practice were the key elements to their sense of belonging to, and understanding of, the TLC and their alignment and identities as teachers and learners of and for ELLs.

### The Context and Practice of Teacher-Learner Communities

Implementing and sustaining a TLC involves attention to ways of using space, time, and activity structures. As instructors, we arranged the desks or tables in the classroom in a manner that encouraged pre-service teachers to look at and listen to each other as they discuss sensitive ideological and political issues related to cultural and linguistic diversity in education. Although this is not a new idea, it is one that must be considered in order to create an optimal environment for a TLC to develop. Over time and through explicit discussion of the class as a community of practice, we developed into a TLC with all its members agreeing to respectfully interact,

collaborate, and assist each other in the community of practice over the course of the semester.

To cultivate the sense of community, the beginning of the semester is dedicated to building community and having the pre-service teachers recognize and examine their own cultural practices (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Middleton, 2002), to see how their community, family, and the sociocultural practices in which they participate throughout their lives comprise who they are and what they know (Melnick & Zeichner, 1997). To do this, the TLC has the pre-service teachers create projects in which they investigate their own sociocultural identities, histories, and communities and share with the class<sup>1</sup>. This type of autobiographical study allows all students to participate actively in the curriculum and to begin to problematize their traditional notions of culture and ethnicity as they relate to their experiences and beliefs about the education of ELLs (Davis, Ramahlo, Beyerbach, & London, 2008; Li, 2007; Nieto & Bode, 2008).

To continue this practice throughout the semester, the class dedicates the first 15 minutes of instruction for any members to share their experiences in and out of school in order to model a culturally responsive pedagogy demonstrating that the pre-service teachers' lives are not separate from their learning, that daily experiences influence their understanding and interactions in school and provide a scaffold for learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995; 2006a; Nieto & Bode, 2008). The authors believe that as the community builds, students feel safe to discuss difficult topics related to their core beliefs about race, culture, and ethnic and linguistic difference and may be socialized into a new understanding of the importance of community in classroom teaching and learning. This practice is a fundamental aspect of the course because it helps to build the safety, trust, and care that are essential in building confidence and camaraderie in the pre-service teachers to interact honestly with each other, to help each other, and to share their ideas (Noddings, 1992; Sim, 2006).

It is important that the organization of practice by both the professor and pre-service teachers fosters the concept of community building and mutual respect, as well as that pre-service teacher-driven case study

projects that center on inquiring about the background, interests, goals, and language and literacy skills of an ELL student (Gonzalez et al., 2005) are implemented in order to enhance the learning and development of preservice teachers. The types of pre-service teacher research expected in the course requires the students to gather information and get to know one student in-depth in order to begin to learn about the ELL's cultural and linguistic experiences and skills. To do this, each pre-service teacher has to interview and observe an ELL to better understand the human aspect of the student and his/her background and experience, as well as conduct several performance assessments with the child throughout the semester (see Appendix). After each type of data is collected, the class members convene to share their stories about what they learned from the experience and to collaborate on determining and relating what they have read in the literature and the strategies and methods that might help make the instruction and curriculum more meaningful and helpful for the child. This type of teacher research and cooperation provides pre-service teachers with the opportunity to implement what they are learning in the teacher education course with students in schools to make meaning of the curriculum in classroom practice (Cochran-Smith, 1998; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992).

The organization and practice of this pedagogy ensures that the faculty instructors are not only teachers of the curriculum, but they are learners as well: they are neither the authorities of each pre-service teacher's cultural experiences nor experts of the case study project, and they structure the curriculum around student learning needs and interests (Ladson-Billings, 2006b). In this way, both faculty and pre-service teachers collaborate in the learning process because the knowledge necessary to meet the case study goal and to participate actively in the curriculum is distributed among all members of the TLC: the instructors are experts at the research, literature, and instructional strategies and methods to teach ELLs; and the pre-service teachers are the experts and responsible teachers in the particular classrooms and schools in which they conduct their case study research and learn about the knowledge, skills, and cultural background of their individual ELL students. It is this multi-voiced aspect of skill and understanding that encourages professors and pre-service teachers to collaborate and learn from each other (Tsui & Law, 2007). As the TLC further develops, pre-service teachers begin to see themselves as part of the broader community beyond our classroom.

In sum, the goal of the diversity courses is to increase ability among our pre-service teachers in education to build and extend the notion of community, and to understand the role, influence, and importance that language, culture, community and background have

<sup>1</sup> There are various activities that we use in our courses that help the pre-service teachers examine their own cultural histories, experiences, and practices. Some of these activities include: All About Me collages and projects, autobiographical stories, and narratives about familial and community experiences and practices. In addition, students produce ABC books in which each letter represents something about the student and his/her cultural experiences. We have also invited students to write "I am from" poems as found at <http://www.georgeallaloyon.com/where.html> or share "Family Pictures" modeled after Carmen Lomas Garza's book titled "Family Pictures: Cuadros de Familia," latest edition published by Children's Book Press in 2005.

in the development of teaching and learning. In addition, the pre-service teachers are provided opportunities to research, study, think, reflect, and share about their own positionality, identity, and assumptions as both teachers and learners in community while they learn about and from an ELL in a local school.

### **The Value of Belonging to the Classroom Community of Practice**

Throughout the three sets of data, the pre-service teachers reported that the TLC provided them with the safety, trust, and connection that they needed to be successful in the course. Because this pedagogy was infused throughout the course and embedded into the culture of the classroom, the pre-service teachers had a constant and safe community in which to develop relationships, provide empathy and support, share stories, scaffold work, and provide feedback to each other, much like a family. One student specifically commented that this type of relaxed, supportive atmosphere was a “breath of fresh air” (online evaluation, May 2009), and a significant part of their sense of belonging in the course, as it encouraged their success in the classroom. Other students’ comments illustrate this further: “[The class] created a stress free environment. It, and I’m sure others would agree, felt like a family in this class. The content in this class will definitely help me in the future” (online evaluation, May 2009); and,

This was a great class. The class was taught in a totally different way than I have ever seen. I want to teach that way in my class . . . I learned a lot of information even though we didn’t feel like we were learning.” (online evaluation, May 2009)

The pre-service teachers testified that the TLC model helped them feel that they were in a community of learners that worked together to meet their personal and professional needs and goals. The engagement and collaboration in the TLC practice helped the pre-service teachers feel “safe and comfortable discussing and debating with one another” (pre-service teacher interview, May 2009) about sociopolitical topics on cultural diversity, which enabled them to think more deeply about the educational practices that exist today for ELLs:

We had a learning community within the four walls that was our classroom, which made it possible for us to open our minds and really think about issues facing our ELLs today and what we can do to help them in every possible way. (online evaluation, May 2009)

In an example of how comfortable the pre-service teachers felt about sharing their feelings and beliefs as

they changed, we present the following narrative. Towards the beginning of the semester, a pre-service teacher had expressed her strong disapproval of undocumented students, those who have entered the US without proper documentation pertaining to their legal status in the US. She had repeatedly stated during class that she believed that such students and their families “just sat back and enjoyed all the benefits that taxpayers provided.” At the very start of class a few weeks later, the same pre-service teacher described how one of her ELL students had fainted during recess as they were having a conversation. The pre-service teacher held the ELL student’s hand as she called for help. When the ELL student regained consciousness, she had begged the pre-service teacher not to call an ambulance for fear that her undocumented status would become known and that she and her family would be deported. The pre-service teacher expressed how she now understood the fear that undocumented students faced and had developed sympathy for their situations.

In every interview, the pre-service teachers expressed great satisfaction with the type of supportive and open atmosphere that the TLC provided, and they liked the open communication and relationships that developed in TLC. The pre-service teachers believed that this organization of learning helped to create a safe and collaborative learning community, and they claimed that they also wanted to emulate the classroom culture by creating a community of practice that they would cultivate the same welcoming and cooperative culture that utilized the students’ cultural backgrounds in the classroom pedagogy.

### **Imagining a Future as Teachers and Learners of and for English Language Learners**

Through the classroom discussions in the TLCs, the pre-service teachers testified that they developed their identities and ability to imagine themselves as future teachers and learners of ELLs. Their work in the TLCs, specifically working on the case study project in and out of class, helped the pre-service teachers to connect their understanding of what they know and learn in the course with real, live students who come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, as the following reflection shows:

Diane (the case study student) broke the mold, she changed my opinion completely about students and teaching; she was a breath of fresh air that was an absolute pleasure to get to know. I learned a lot about a culture that I had no prior knowledge about, and for the first time I was able to form a teacher-student relationship with a student. With that in mind I didn’t necessarily just learn about ELLs and how to improve their

learning, I learned a lot about being a teacher and getting to know my students. This experience will help me develop a better relationship with my students. As we have learned throughout our studies in this class that you cannot help your students grow without growing with them. I feel that this project gave me the experience that will jumpstart me into the more personal aspect of teaching, and at the same time will help me become a better mentor to my ELL students. (pre-service teacher reflection, May 2009)

The pre-service teachers attested that this connection and engagement in the TLC practice helped to develop their sense of belonging and understanding of being teachers and learners of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. More significantly, they reported that the course afforded them opportunities to imagine what their work would be like with ELLs in their future classrooms. This alignment to the TLC community of practice and the work with ELLs in schools helped them to bridge the gap between what they learned in the courses in cultural diversity and their future practice in schools with ELLs, making the work they did in the TLC relevant and meaningful:

While I used to feel like ELLs were more trouble than necessary, I now feel confident that I can teach them just as well as any other student. I realize now that ELLs are more than just a label defining their language proficiency. They are students, just like any other, with personal lives, histories, and knowledge that exist outside of the classroom. By far the most important thing that I have learned is to incorporate every students' funds of knowledge into my classroom activities so that my students can feel welcome and supported in the class, and so that my students can build upon the knowledge they already have to support the new knowledge they will obtain. (pre-service teacher reflection, May 2009)

Another pre-service teacher indicated the following in her written reflection:

This [course] has taught me many important realizations. First, not all ELLs are Hispanic; they come in all shapes and sizes. Second, every single one of them has a unique story and a unique life outside of school. And last, they are people; this may sound silly, but in my previous class, ELLs seemed like something that we would just have to learn how to deal with. Through this class and this [case study] assignment, I can see that English

Language Learners are just that: learners. They are still students who are coming to school to learn, the same as every other student, and from this assignment, I now feel that I can handle this responsibility as a teacher. (pre-service teacher reflection, May 2009)

There were only two pre-service teachers who expressed their discontent with either the inquiry project or the course. The first pre-service teacher expressed in the interview that he did not like the case study assignment because he had difficulty finding an ELL student with whom to work. For this reason, he found the work cumbersome. Another pre-service teacher indicated that he or she would have preferred the class to have demonstrated more traditional teaching strategies in the course and to have had more experiences that would have helped him/her develop empathy toward not understanding the language spoken by the majority:

I wish we had utilized and practiced more ESL strategies in class. I also think it would have been beneficial to take us to a non-English speaking place and not allow us to speak English, trying to figure out what we are supposed to do, much like ELLs in school do. (online evaluation, May 2009)

Overall, the pre-service teacher reflections, course evaluation comments, and testimonies suggest that the TLC can be positive, practical, and powerful source of influence and support. The community of practice that a TLC provides helped the pre-service teachers develop the confidence, understanding, empathy, and competence to imagine and align their developing beliefs as teachers and learners of ELL students to the goals of the TLC community of practice. It is possible that the engagement and sense of belonging that occurred in this organization of instruction provided pre-service teachers with the necessary apprenticeship to cultivate communities of practice in their future teaching that build upon the diversity of cultures, experience, and knowledge that invariably make up every classroom context.

### **Limitations**

We acknowledge that there are several limitations in this study to consider. The study participants were the pre-service teachers in the authors' course, and although we provided a classroom context where pre-service teachers were able to disagree with course content and instructors without fear of reprisal, it is possible that there may have been possible bias in the participants' responses due to the power structures that exist in classroom contexts.



### How this Practice is Suited to Courses in Teacher Education that Focus on Instruction for English Language Learners

We believe that the TLC is a promising way to help pre-service teachers build connections and collaborate in efficient ways to examine their own assumptions and ideologies of education, especially those that they hold for ELLs. We strive to meet the needs of the ELL community by having pre-service teachers understand how they can become a valuable part of the students' cultural, linguistic, and academic development and see themselves as part of a community that extends past their own experiences. Descriptive studies such as this one are important and should encourage people in various international settings to collect and provide descriptive studies that illuminate how teachers and learners in various international contexts engage in sociocultural learning and instruction so as to have a greater understanding of various cultural and linguistic contexts of communities of practice.

Because the TLC is an embedded structure in the course that consistently discusses pre-service teachers' needs, lives, and understandings related to the course, assignments or the curriculum in general, the pre-service teachers have a consistent community of peers and faculty with whom they can work in partnership while they are conducting their case study research, reading, and writing their papers. The TLC serves as a group of critical friends that provides the pre-service teachers with the social, emotional, and scholarly assistance needed to be successful in the course (Beck & Kosnick, 2001; Curry, 2008).

Research suggests that learning is a voluntary, transformational process that occurs through interaction and participation with peers and others more expert in community (Rogoff, 1995; Wenger & Lave, 2001). The end result of this learning process is that the learner's identity or understanding of his/her participation has been changed in some way to fit the needs of the community (Wenger et al., 2002), hopefully a larger community than was originally intended. Research indicates that pre-service teachers who have successfully engaged in communities of practice with teachers in schools have a better understanding of the relationship of theory in practice (Sim, 2006; Sutherland et al., 2005). The purposeful collaboration in our TLCs around research, writing, reading, and discussing in a community of practice provides opportunities to socialize and cultivate the pre-service teachers' identities as both teachers and learners of themselves as practitioners and of ELL students in local schools (Wenger, 1998).

Finally, we believe that employing the TLC pedagogy in teacher education courses may help to

establish improved norms for teaching and learning in schools, especially for diverse student populations. Because one function of the TLC is to assist pre-service teachers to carry out applied case study projects to get to know the background, cultural practices, and skills of an ELL student in the context of local practice, this inherent design feature has the potential to facilitate their ability to build connections between theory and practice for diverse student populations (Cochran-Smith, 1998; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992). Thus, the TLC provides the basis for a model of teaching that encourages and builds upon the notion of communities of practice for teaching to develop teachers' lived experience in schools to support educational change for all students. This conceptual model for organizing learning, thought, and action in teacher education can help pre-service teachers to see themselves as part of a community that extends beyond their own front doors and to prepare them to better serve their future students.

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MARGARITA JIMENEZ-SILVA is an associate professor at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. Her research focuses on preparing teachers to work with English learners, emphasizing teacher education pedagogy and

curriculum. She has worked extensively with researchers and educators to make content area curriculum more accessible to English learners. Prior to entering higher education, she worked with Newcomer students as a middle-school teacher in Oakland, California.

KATE OLSON is an independent scholar in education. She has taught at various universities across the United States. Her research interests focus on the effects of district and state education policies on teaching and learning for English Learners and multicultural teacher education.

## Appendix Case Study in the Course Syllabus

The following description shows how the authors present the case study project in the course syllabus:

To connect theory learned in class with ‘real-world’ experience, each student in the class will conduct a case study on a child, an ELL student of their choice from their field experience (practicum) classrooms. This case study consists of getting to know an ELL student, collecting data that informs you about the cultural practices and knowledge of the student, which will help you analyze his/her cultural and linguistic knowledge, strengths and skills. In addition, this case study will help you determine what strategies and activities will best suit the needs of the ELL student.

### COLLECTING DATA

#### *Interview and Observations*

For this assignment, you will need to collect data on your ELL student throughout the semester. The first part of the assignment focuses on gathering data on the background, cultural and linguistic experiences and knowledge of your ELL student. The second part of the assignment is to gather data on his/her linguistic competencies in English. All the information collected will help you understand better how to look at children and think about what strategies and instructional methods and activities are best to meet a student’s individual needs.

To collect the background data, you will need to arrange time to talk with the child/adult you have selected and learn about her/his experiences in and out of school. Formal and informal interviews should be used. Be sure to spend some time with the student and become comfortable with them before you formally interview. Speaking to teachers or others who know the child is helpful. Be sure to devote enough time to the process. It takes time to get to know a student and to understand his/her cultural practices and background. Be sure to pay attention to determining the child’s language learning experiences as well as educational history, family life, out-of-school experiences, language (s) spoken at home, length of stay in the US, preferred school subjects, pastimes and any other influences on his/her learning in general and language learning in particular.

You keep record of your observations and interactions with the ELL student. These notes should record how the student interacts in different contexts (inside and outside the classroom environment), any interactions that he/she participated in and what he/she said, and your feelings about the observation, interaction, or any other aspect related to the experience or the child. Please write notes about your observations (including the time, date and place) and keep them in a folder to be turned in with the interview data. These data will be used in classroom workshop activities throughout the semester to help you with the process of analyzing and interpreting the data and need to be collected with the final paper.

#### *Speaking and Writing Data*

In addition to the interview, you will need to collect several writing samples and an oral language sample. The writing samples can be copies of written work they complete in class, with any identifying information such as their name or school deleted. The writing should not be edited nor corrected for errors unless you are able to get a series of samples reflecting the writing process. You will also need a tape recording of their oral language. You can make the recording into a game to help them be at ease with it (i.e., recording your voice and listening to it with them and then letting them record their own). You will need to get at least 5 minutes of talk. That sample will then need to be transcribed so that you can examine it systematically. You will conduct a SOLOM assessment of your ELL’s language skills in English. These data will be used in classroom workshop activities throughout the semester to help you with the process of analyzing and interpreting the data and need to be collected with the final paper.

### WRITING THE FINAL CASE STUDY PAPER

Your write-up will consist of 15-20 pages analyzing all the data samples collected. In your paper, you should write a section that provides the reader with all the background information on the case study student. In other words, what are his/her “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez et. al, 2005) providing the detailed information that you gathered from getting to know your ELL student, the interviews, and observations.

After describing the background information on the child's language and learning experiences and behaviors, the paper should analyze each language sample indicating what you learned about this child's language skills, and write what you learned from looking comparatively across the samples about your ELL's linguistic abilities. Your analysis should identify the child's skills and strengths as well as any needs you discover. It is important that you avoid "deficit" language in your description of this student.

Once you have identified the ELL student's skills, you should write what strategies, modifications, activities, methods, and lessons you would use to meet the needs of the ELL student and to help develop his/her language and literacy skills.

Finally, you need to reflect upon the research experience of getting to know your case study student, of what you learned during the process of getting to know the student, of collecting and analyzing the data, and of what data or information would have helped make this experience, assignment, analysis and/or assessment stronger.

It is essential that you refer to the readings and classroom discussions in your analysis to help frame your discussion of the ELL's language and learning background and skills.