

## Coffee Shop Talk: How Can a Community of Practice that Focuses on a Collaborative Team Teaching Classroom Affect My Teaching?

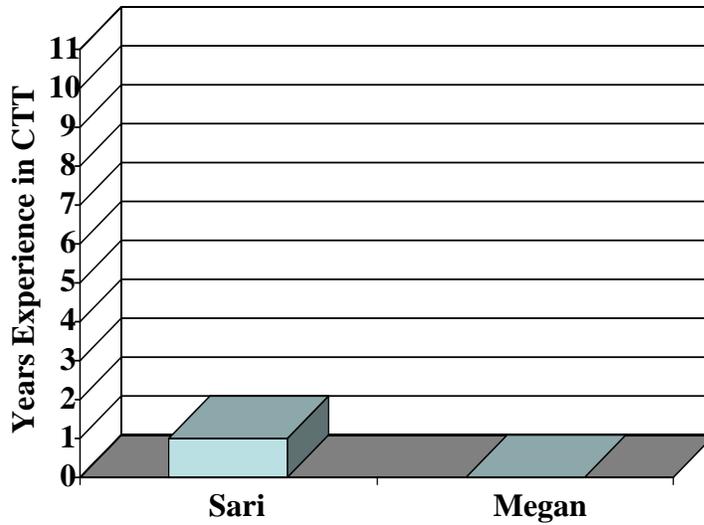


**Community of Practice** is a self organizing group of people within an organization who meet to discuss things that matter.  
(Etienne Wenger)

**Collaborative Team Teaching** is “an integrated service through which students with disabilities are educated with age-appropriate peers in a general education classroom. The CTT classroom consists of one special education teacher and one general education teacher who meet to co-plan lessons, activities and projects that incorporate all learning modalities.”  
(NYC BOE)

Megan Bender  
Teacher Network Leadership Institute  
New York City, NY  
2007

### Rationale



\*A graph showing my co-teacher's and my experience in a CTT classroom

During my seventh year of teaching I became a co-teacher in a Collaborative Team Teaching Classroom (CTT). My co-teacher, Sara, and I worked together 2 years previous when I taught 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and she taught a 2/3 self contained class. A CTT class is a general education class where 40% of the students have an IEP. As excited as I was, I was beginning to feel anxious about my new role. This was my first experience teaching in a CTT class. This was also my first experience being a co-teacher. People talked about how working in a CTT classroom was like a marriage. We would have to make joint decisions for student growth and joint decisions to improve classroom practice. I began to realize I didn't have formal training to support our talk in these areas.

Also during this time I was thinking about forming a teacher group to talk about education issues and best practices. I envisioned teachers gathering once a month to discuss education policy, classroom concerns and best practices.

After thinking about my needs, it made sense for me to form a group where teachers could focus on the needs of students in a Collaborative Team Teaching classroom. Hence, A Community of Practice was formed. A Community of Practices is defined as a "joint enterprise" where members are bound by a "social entity" "that develop around things that matter to people". (Wenger)

## **Context**

I work at PS 58, The Carroll School in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn, NY.

The total population of this school is 482 – There are 80.5% general education students and 19.5% special education students. 7.68% of these special ed students are in a “Most Restrictive Environment” setting (12:1) and 11.83% are in a “Least Restrictive Environment” setting (Collaborative Team Teaching/ SETTS). 48% are female; 52% are male. Of these students, .22% are Indian; 8.71% are Asian/Pacific Islander; 29.46% are Hispanic; 12.66% are Black; 48.96% are White. There is an English Language Learners population of 5.6%.

Sara’s and my 3<sup>rd</sup> grade CTT classroom reflects the school’s diversity. In the beginning of the year our class started with 9 special education students. Over the course of the year 2 students were transferred into a 12:1 class, 1 student was decertified and no longer has an IEP, 1 student came to our class on the special ed side from a general ed class and 2 students came to our class on the special ed side from a 12:1 class. 2 general ed students have an IEP and receive SETTs (Resource Room) services. At the end of the year, 9 out of 21 students are special education students and have an IEP. 2 students are general education students with an IEP and receive SETTS. Out of our final count of 21 students, 9 students are special education students and 11 students are general education students. Out of the whole class, 3 students are English Language Learners. The classroom is ethnically diverse including Latino, Black, White and Asian students.

## **Review of Literature**

The research I found supported my feelings of being under-prepared to teach in a Collaborative Team Teaching classroom. Price, Mayfield, McFadden, and Marsh (2000-2001) state that because of the demands of team teaching such as now having “to share, cooperate, and agree on methods of instruction...discipline, evaluation, supervision of classroom aides, and other matters” most teachers are not prepared. Therefore, “inclusion roles can be overwhelming to classroom teachers who have always been alone with his or her students.” Training is essential because working in a new team requires new roles and understandings. Administration should plan on giving inclusion (CTT) teachers more time to plan, prepare and meet with other service providers. (Chapter 3)

Furthermore, my idea to form a teacher support group around a CTT class became more validated after reading an article entitled, “Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement”, by Dr. Shirley M. Hord (1997). Susan Rozenholtz believes that teachers who feel “supported in their ongoing learning and classroom practice were more committed and effective than those who were not.” They can be supported through teacher networks, cooperation among colleagues, and expanded professional roles. I knew this would be a good time to form a support group since I was in a new position without formal training as of yet.

My next step was to research how to form a support group and to get an idea of what this could look like. I found Etienne Wenger to be an expert on these “Community of Practices”. He believes that “even though people are a part of a larger organization they interact with a smaller group on a more regular basis. It is here where they learn in

this informal setting.” (1998) (p. 1) People who are involved in a Community of Practice are informally bound and often engage in lunchtime discussions and problem –solving conversations. Communities of Practice revolve around “things that matter” (p.2) A Community of Practice is defined by three aspects: 1. What it is about 2. How it functions 3. What capability it has produced( p. 2). Communities of Practice don’t need outside support, but can benefit from outside resources for encouragement and guidance. They are self-sufficient and should be organized from the inside out, not outside in, meaning they should not be manipulated by a higher position. (p.7) People are involved in a community of practice “at the same time as they belong to other organizational structures” (p.4). They are still doing other workplace tasks, and use a Community of Practice to develop the knowledge it takes to successfully work in the workplace.

Altogether, our group need fits with Mazlow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Social needs are met at work through informal groups. According to Mazlow, once these needs have been fulfilled one can move to Self Esteem Needs. These needs are satisfied through recognition, accomplishment and self worth. Once this stage is met, then one moves to the final need, Self Realization. This need is characterized by the desire to grow, develop and find what one is capable of. In the workplace one wants to grow through learning new skills and to “be the best”. Only those who want to satisfy the highest need do so. Wanting to reach the highest level is on a case per case basis (Mazlow).

## **Tools**

### **Community of Practice Meeting Notes**

When thinking about who to include in a group of dedicated learners, besides my co-teacher, I thought about two friends who also teach in the Carroll Gardens neighborhood. Jane is a general education teacher, teaching 6<sup>th</sup> grade CTT for the second year in a row. Karen is the general education teacher and teaches 5<sup>th</sup> grade CTT for the first year. We all teach in the same district in Brooklyn NY. When I thought about Sara, Karen, Jane and myself meeting as a group, I thought that each person could commit and be interested in exploring her teaching. Keeping in Mind Mazlow’s Self Realization Need, I felt confident that these teachers would want to grow as CTT teachers.

The meeting notes are structured as follows:

- Date
- Notes from Discussion
- Action in Classroom

### **Goal Sheets**

During our second meeting we decided to create a “Goal Sheet” centering around a goal, not a child. The students could be general education students or students with an IEP. This enabled us to focus on several students who needed to work on the same goal.

Goal:  
Intervention

Name	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Total					

\*Does the intervention have an impact on the child's success?

X= Evidence of the child reaching the goal

\*A typical Goal Sheet

**Reading Conference Notes**

I chose 3 students, AT, TC and JB, and looked at the frequency and quality of conferences from the beginning of the year from when Sara and I did not have an organized system for conferring with students due to our new roles as CTT teachers, to the middle of the year when I conferred with the level M and above readers and Sara conferred with the level L readers and below readers, to the end of the year where we continued to split our readers into two groups. The levels reflect Fountas and Pinnel's leveling system, A-Z. The level children are expected to reach by the end of third grade is Level O.

**Data**

**Community of Practice Meeting Notes**

Community of Practice Meeting #1 November 15, 2006

Notes from discussion:

We brainstormed a list of 10 concerns that we were beginning to face in our CTT classrooms:

- Teacher relationships
- More struggling students in the classroom
- More behavior and discipline issues
- Student independence
- Academic vs. Organization-teacher highlights
- Common Expectations
- Common Discipline
- Paperwork

## Daily responsibilities

### Action in classroom:

We reviewed students' goals on IEP (Individual Education Plans). We observed students behaviors and decided that we could group a few students together in order to improve their behavior, which could have a direct impact on their performance.

### Community of Practice- Meeting #2 November 29, 2006

#### Notes From Discussion:

Together we began our meeting, with the goals of the previous meeting on our mind. We all agreed that it was too much and unnecessary paperwork to create a goal chart for each child. At this point the conversation revolved around our students needs based on our observations. We created a "Student Goal Sheet" that was based around the goal and intervention, not the child or IEP. This way we could group many both general ed students and special ed students together.

### Action in classroom:

I created a template for a "Goal Sheet" that included the goal, the intervention and students names.

We created 2 goal sheets after observing student and their needs.

1. Listen to the read aloud and lessons on the rug
2. Listen to Simple Directions

Date: 12/12/06	
Goal: To stay focused on lesson while on rug.	
Intervention: Change seats on rug.	
Student's Names	
<del>Marijuana</del>	Cedrick
Joynee	
Mariana	
Adam	

•An example of the first type of Goal Sheet

### Community of Practice Meeting #3 December 14, 2006

#### Notes from discussion:

We discussed the positives and the negatives of the Goal Sheet. On the positive side, it is a handy way to keep students with similar needs organized. On the negative side, it is extra paperwork and there is no way to track student outcomes to see if the intervention is working. We also talked about how to keep reading conferences notes organized with two teachers conferring. At this point Sara and I had one clipboard for Reading Conferences, one for Math and one for Writing Conferences. Karen shared that she confers with the

general education students while her co-teacher confers with the students with IEPs, thus having two different conferring clipboards. This led Sara and I to think we should split our readers into two categories; students on level M and above and students on level L and below.

**Action in classroom:**

We decided to change the Goal Sheet to include an area to track students outcomes so we can see if our intervention is helpful or not. There is room for several checks if students are reaching the goal throughout the day. Sara and I split the reading Conferences into two groups. Sara started conferring with all students at level L and lower, while I confer with students at level M and higher. We have a clipboard each that we use to keep our conference notes



- An example of the revised Goal Sheet

Community of Practice #4 March 6, 2006

**Notes from Discussion:**

Jane stated that our Community of Practice is much like the teacher centers in schools and neighborhoods that allowed an informal and organic way for teachers to come together to discuss important issues.

We talked about how the relationship between the teachers must be solid in order to create high standards and expectations in the classroom. We also talked about ways to improve teaching in the classroom and thought it would be a good idea to make and “areas to grow” list.

Action in classroom:

Sara and I each made a list of areas to grow.

Megan	Sara
*Planning and moving forward	*More weekly planning
Word Study	*Wilson
*Keeping better conferring notes	Plan from conference notes
Create a better assessment system	Look at individual students needs
Plan strategy groups	Plan strategy groups
*Differentiate math	*Look at students needs in math
*Keep kids accountable for behavior/consequences	*Deeper thinking in reading responses
	More cursive and Social Studies

\*The asterisks symbolize areas of growth.

### Goal Sheet

Week: 1/29				
Goal:				
Listening to simple directions				
Intervention:				
Repeat directions				
Name	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
Jaymee	Ab —			A
Kristal				
Marana				
Sabella				
Adam				
Dina				

\*An example of a revised Goal Sheet

Goal #1: For students to listen to Read Aloud and lessons on the rug

Intervention: Group students during lessons and have teacher sit next to them to listen in on Turn and Talks and to refocus during lessons

	<b>Jan</b>	<b>Feb</b>	<b>March</b>
<b>Adam</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>60%</b>
Arian	74%	91%	80%
Jaymee	87%	92%	80%
Mariana	87%	73%	60%
<b>Isabella</b>	<b>95%</b>	<b>96%</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Percentage of times students were on task during random check-ins

One out of five students improved their listening skills during lessons and read aloud after we implemented the intervention.

Goal #2: Listen to simple directions

Intervention: Have students repeat directions

	Jan	Feb	March
Adam	71%	42%	56%
<b>Arian</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>89%</b>
<b>Jaymee</b>	<b>36%</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>78%</b>
Mariana	71%	90%	78%
<b>Isabella</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>95%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Ryan	86%	74%	67%

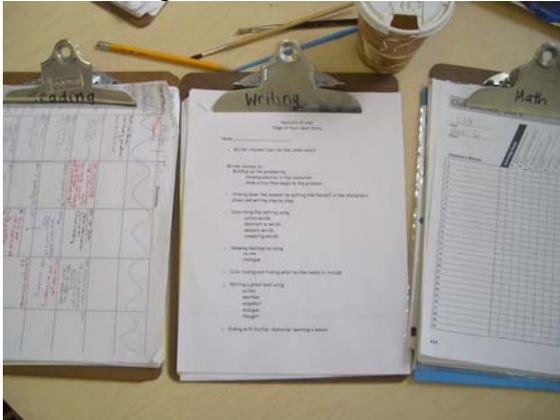
\*Percentage of times students were on task during random check-ins

Three out of six students improved in following directions after we implemented the intervention.

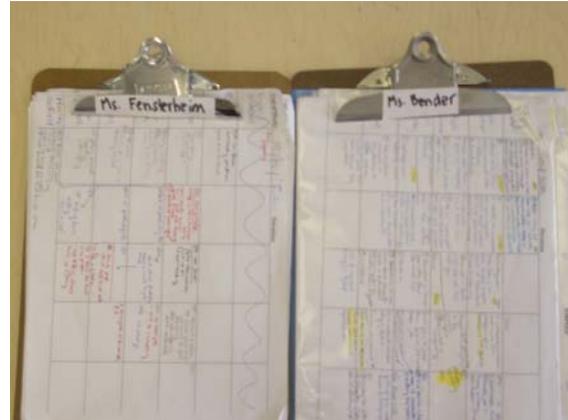
### **Reading Conference Notes**

In the beginning of the year, Sara and I shared one clipboard with conference notes. During my conferences, I would take notes on a pad of paper and transfer them to the main conference notes. After that I took notes on a label, but still transferred the label to the main conference notes. We conferred with students randomly. At this point either one

of us would confer with any student and we did not have system in place to keep track of the quality of conferences in order for us to build upon them. This pictures below show are clip boards in the beginning of the year and then in the middle of the year after the third meeting.



One clipboard per subject

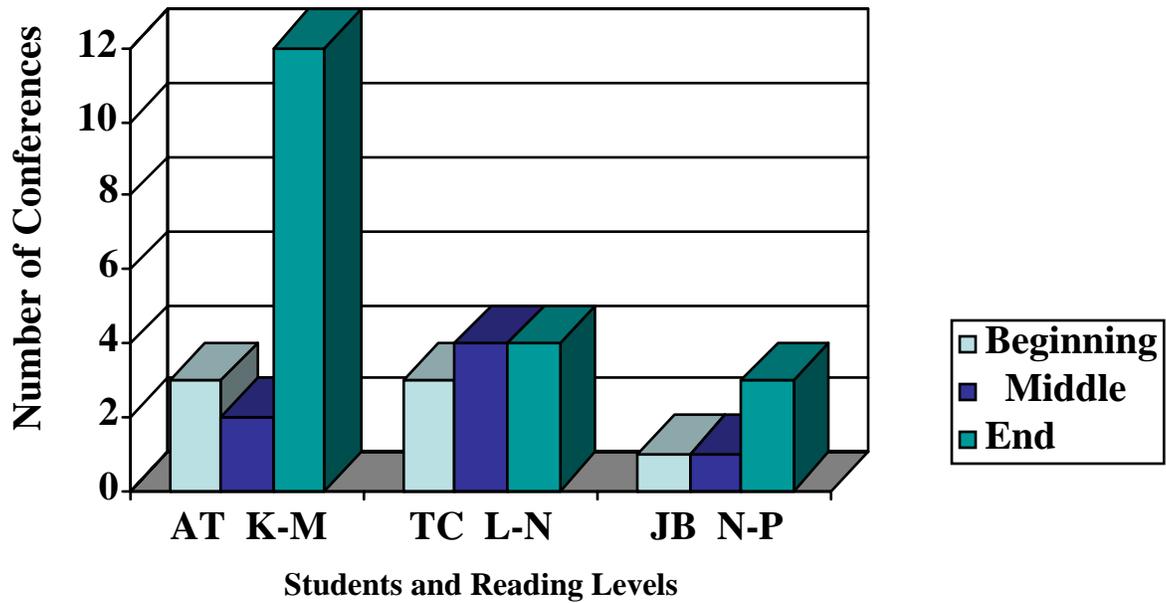


One clipboard per teacher

#### Frequency of Conferences:

I chose three students, AT, TC, JB and counted the number of conferences in the beginning of the year from when Sara and I did not have a system for which child to confer with. Then I looked at these same students and counted the number of conferences with these students in the middle of the year right after our implementation of our new conferring system. Then I counted the number of conferences at the end of the year with the three students. Below is a chart showing the results.

## Frequency of Reading Conferences



### Types of Conferences:

In the beginning of the year, since Sara's and my Conferring system was not organized, our quality of conferences did not build off of each other. Over the course of the year I was able to follow three students and build upon the type of conference for each. The chart below shows the students and the types of conferences I taught from the beginning, middle and end of the year. Lower level reading skills are more focus on fluency and comprehension. As levels increase we teach different strategies to infer. To hold onto a theory across books is a higher order thinking skill.

Student	Beginning of the Year	Middle of the Year	End of the Year
AT	Comprehension	Comprehension	Comprehension
TC	Fluency	Comprehension	Inference and holding a theory
JB	Comprehension	Inference	Holding a theory across books

### Analysis

After reviewing the content of the Community of Practice notes it shows that during the initial meetings the conversations was surface and towards the end we opened

up more and talked about our on practice as teachers. During our first meetings we talked about general problems that arise in a CTT classroom and focused the discussion more on the child, not the teachers. During the last meeting we discussed problems between co-teachers that were coming up in the classroom. All of the problems that came up, we agreed, were difficult to talk about with the co-teacher, but easy to talk about in the Community of Practice meeting. Sara and Jane's co-teacher knew each other in the beginning of their teaching careers, therefore, Jane felt uneasy about opening up and discussing core problems from their classroom. Jane thought that whatever she said would "get back" to her co-teacher. After getting to know Sara over the course of the year, Jane felt safer and was able to become more honest about issues that were bothering her. I can see that trust did not come easy, but was established over the months, which became integral to holding deeper discussions and talking about issues that arise in a CTT classroom. It was helpful for Jane not to have her co-teacher present during these meetings. As Maslow suggests, Safety Needs are satisfied through safe working conditions. I found that Jane didn't feel comfortable sharing what she was really struggling with until she had her safety needs met. Once she trusted Sara, then she felt that she could open up. At this point she was able to begin fulfilling the need of Self Realization by growing as a teacher as a result of our open discussions.

Our Coffee Shop Community of Practice meetings reflect what Etienne Wenger believes that meetings are formed around "things that matter". Here, we wanted to improve our practice as Collaborative Team Teachers. During the third meeting Sara and I talked about our need for our reading conferences notes to be better organized. Wenger calls this "problem solving" or "seeking experience", which are two activities in a Community of Practice. I can see that as a result of organizing our reading conference system I conferred more frequently and was able to build upon the last conference, which deepened the learning. Through the first two meetings I was able to make a "Goal Sheet" to help focus during lessons and follow directions. For each goal, only some students improved by using each interventions. This shows me that only some students 'need the "check ins" while others needed a different type of support. Next I can look more closely at what works for these students.

Although my school supports me as a teacher, I felt like my Community of Practice meetings supported me as a CTT teacher. As Susan Rosenholtz suggests, teachers should feel supported in order to improve practice and develop more skills. Thus, through these meetings I was able to improve my practice, in order to improve myself as a teacher, which led me to better support my students.

Evidence suggests that overall student growth came out of the meetings. According to the "Goal Sheet" that we formed as result of the first meeting, one out of five students improved their listening skills during lessons and read aloud after we implemented the intervention. Three out of six students improved in following directions after we implemented the intervention. Also, as a result of the change in Reading Conferences, I now hold more frequent and substantial conferences. I was able to teach inferring and holding a theory across books to two out of three students. I saw growth in these two students. The third student also did not improve in paying attention to lessons or following directions.

I developed as a teacher because I became more organized and accountable. During the time that my co-teacher was teaching, I would help students pay attention to

the lesson better. This was an outcome of the “Goal Sheet”. I also became better at Conferring with students in Reading Workshop, also a result from a discussion in a meeting. After the fourth meeting we made a chart of areas to grow. Out of seven targeted areas, I improved my practice in four areas. This shows that with the support from these meetings, I was able to develop my skills even more.

Unfortunately, these meetings were held after school on our own time. For a thank you, I bought coffee and treats. This was in lieu of any form of compensation. Price, Mayfield, McFadden, and Marsh agree that a CTT class can be overwhelming to a teacher who is used to having her own classroom, and that training is essential. These meetings became our “training” where we learned, much like in the form of a professional development meeting.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The Policy recommendations that I suggest are at a school or district level. Community of Practices should take place in school (internal) or include members from different schools (external). I found that these informal meetings had an impact on student achievement; therefore, it is important for all teachers to be involved in this “other” form of learning.

Community of Practice meetings could be in lieu of professional development, depending upon the topic. For instance, our meetings revolved around a Collaborative Team Teaching class, but they could have just as easily focused on community building or behavior management. In New York City many of us have the opportunity to attend reading and writing professional development through our schools, but less of an opportunity for other kinds of professional development.

Community of Practice meetings should also be compensated by an extra prep, per-session or p-credit since this is a professional development opportunity. Some schools compensate grade meetings during an extra preparation period.

Most importantly, CoP Meetings must allow all members to feel safe and secure in order for the meetings to be fully productive. Therefore, meetings should be self sufficient like Wenger states and should not be controlled by someone in a higher position. I learned that trust plays a major role in these meetings; therefore members should have a choice if they want their co-teacher, reading or Math coach to join the meeting. These meetings should not be held by an Assistant Principal or Principal.

### **Bibliography**

- Hord, Shirley M. (1997). “Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement”, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Price, Mayfield, McFadden and Marsh (2000-2001). Special Education for Inclusive Classrooms, Parot Publishing L.L.C.

Wenger, Etienne (1998). "Communities of Practice, Learning as a Social System".  
Published in "Systems Thinker".  
The Continuum of Services for Students with Disabilities. New York City Department of  
Education, New York, NY.  
Schertz-Cibalo- Universal City Independent School District. Mazlow's Hierarchy of  
Needs, Schertz, TX.