

## Communication, technology and collaboration for innovation

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### Introduction

We offer this chapter as both an argument for, and an example of, collegial collaboration in the service of innovation. Our initial approach is autobiographical, because this allows us to ballast our proposals with the weight of our specific personal experiences. Julian's story begins with his discovery of non-judgemental communication and moves towards the use of information and communications technology (ICT). Mariam's story begins in the context of ICT and leads towards her discovery of non-judgemental communication. Their two narratives meet in the on-line facilitation of Cooperative Development, in which we see a powerful, collaborative response to a challenge that we believe to be widespread and pressing.

This challenge arises from the everyday pressure on classroom teachers, who will frequently be less ICT-literate than their students, to devise and implement convincing pedagogic experiences that exploit the affordances of the new technologies. This pressure can only increase. In-service updating at a skills level (along the traditional lines of, '*How to use the tape recorder/interactive whiteboard/ RSS feeds*') will not be able to keep pace.

As Ertmer and Ottenbreit-Leftwich (2010) put it:

Unfortunately, learning about technology is equivalent to asking teachers to hit a moving target. Teachers will never have "complete" knowledge about the tools available, as they are always in a state of flux. This often results, then, in teachers being perpetual novices in the process of technology integration (Mueller et al., 2008), which suggests the need for teachers to have strong self-efficacy for teaching with technology. (pp. 260-261)

In line with this observation, we suggest that the teacher development of the future will be at least as much a question of evolving a *way of being* as it will of learning lists of competencies. It is in this area that we hope to make our contribution, in the shape of Cooperative Development, an approach to collegial communication that engages the personal as well as the professional, calls for action as well as self-expression, requires and builds empathy and interpersonal trust, and facilitates community-building as well as individual growth.

Finally, we extend to you an invitation to use the static, print-based chapter that you are now reading as a key to wider collaboration in a digital future.

## Julian's story

As a teacher trainer in the 1980s, I spent a certain amount of time sitting at the back of classes, making notes and then giving feedback. On some occasions, I found it difficult to get my points across to the teacher concerned. And on some of those occasions, I started to glimpse the fact that what I had 'observed' was not what the teacher had seen herself as 'doing'. At its most obvious, the difference between 'failing to correct' and 'encouraging fluency' lies in awareness and purpose, not in behaviour. In similar fashion, 'failure to achieve the aims of the lesson' and 'excellent use of unplanned teaching opportunity' might equally well describe what happened in a class. And in less easily definable ways, I began to feel that since comments of mine did not arise from a full understanding of the teacher's experience of the lesson, they might well be frustratingly meaningless at worst and perhaps only tangentially interesting at best. So I started to listen and check more, and talk less. This, in turn, led to a realisation that, as some teachers talked, especially when they were not feeling defensive, they came to realisations that had nothing at all to do with my notes – they produced their own self-constructed realisations of possibilities that they were keen to follow up on.

At the same time, my reading of the inspirational Earl Stevick (1980) had introduced me to what were then called *humanistic* approaches to language teaching. This led me to the writings of Carl Rogers, a connection made more concrete by the publication of Rogers (1983) *Freedom to Learn for the 80's*. What I took/take to be central to Rogers' work is, first, the conviction that each individual has what he called a *self-actualising tendency* – an inclination to develop into the best person that they can be. Many circumstances can, and do, get in the way of this tendency. By the same token, however, circumstances can be influenced in order to facilitate the workings of this same tendency. That is a major role of the teacher; and, by extension, of the teacher educator. Second, Rogers saw learning not only as a set of intellectual procedures or behavioural skills for the individual, but as a whole-person experience, engaging the emotions, imagination and activity embedded in social interaction. Once again, the extension to teacher education seems to follow naturally.

And in parallel with these developments (as I initially thought), I found myself becoming ever more impatient with what Clarke (1994) was later to call the '*dysfunctions of the theory/practice discourse*,' and increasingly interested in the potential of what Schön (1983) called *reflective practice*, as well as the tradition established in general education (e.g. Carr & Kemmis, 1986) of *action research*. Both these latter seemed to offer ways of changing what was generally meant by 'theory' in teacher education: a change away from the sense of abstract rules that were handed down from on high, and towards the sense of located statements, painstakingly worked out, that actually accounted for authentic teaching experience. Such an approach also required the reconceptualization of the role of teachers away from the idea of technicians who applied other people's schemes and towards the idea of explorers and articulators of what had been learned.

By this point, the above lines of thinking were no longer running in parallel, but feeding each other in ways that led to Edge and Richards (1993), the first of several conference collections under the series heading of *Teachers Develop Teachers Research*. They had also led me to devise a collegial way of working with a fellow teacher that I called *Cooperative Development* (Edge, 1992). Cooperative Development sets out to harness Rogers' self-actualising tendency with regard to personal and professional development. It does so by providing the kind of interpersonal context in which a person can pursue the kind of non-defensive exploration of their ideas that leads them, when all goes well, to discoveries of their own on which they can base their own plans of action. In terms of human relations and communication, it enables a *way of being* (Rogers, 1980) that is facilitative of the goals of reflective practice (continuing professional development) and of action research (the theorising of authentic experience).

Cooperative Development in its earliest forms involved two people who met as equals, determined to dispel the sense of isolation that the classroom teacher can sometimes experience (Park, Oliver, Johnson, Graham, & Oppong, 2007). They discuss the roles and the procedures involved and they commit to keeping to them, or to developing them. They agree on a time to meet and they offer each other complete confidentiality regarding what is said. At each meeting, one person takes on the role of the Speaker, the person who brings an issue to work on, and one person the Understander, the colleague who will work to co-construct the environment in which non-defensive exploration can take place. In other words, both Speaker and Understander are working on the self-development of the Speaker, thus recognising that self-development is well-mediated in social process.

The Speaker, then, is committed to exploring the issue that s/he has nominated, to search for new insights, to make discoveries and to plan future action. In addition to the usefulness of each exploration, the Speaker is adding to the construction of a new trajectory of discourse in professional development. Rather than bemoaning the disparity between what s/he may have been taught 'in theory' and 'what works' in the classroom, the Speaker is faced with the challenge of asking, "*OK, I know what I have learned, intellectually and experientially. Now, how do I make of all this the best sense that I can?*"

In support of this effort, the Understander offers a complete and respectful acceptance of what the Speaker has to say; No agreement, no disagreement, just positive acceptance. More than that, the Understander offers empathy, a genuine attempt to see things from the Speaker's perspective. The Understander also offers complete sincerity with regard to acceptance and empathy – there will be no attempt to influence the Speaker's thinking or feeling or planning. There will be no exchange of ideas.

It becomes immediately apparent that the rules of interaction are unusual. As such, they produce unusual pressures on both Speaker and Understander.

When we speak, we expect an evaluative response to what we have said. We expect to be told what the person we are talking to thinks about the subject. When these responses are

deliberately removed, we are left to assess ourselves the value of what we have said. We are also called upon to continue, to dig deeper, to work out what follows, logically, perhaps, or in recognition of how we are feeling, or in terms of plausible action. One element of the situation that makes it easier for us to respond to these unusual pressures is the agreement that we have with our Understander: we are not being evaluated. We can let our ideas run free, we can take risks, there is nothing that we will have to defend. This is what we mean by Speaking in the context of Cooperative Development.

When we listen to someone, we also expect to have our say. Indeed, some of the time we don't even let them finish before telling them what we think. Or we listen to the beginning of what they have to say and then spend the rest of their talking time preparing our response. It can be very difficult (more for some people than others) to clear one's head of one's own opinions, to put aside one's own experience, to repress the urge to agree or disagree, to add one's own examples and arguments. Instead of an exchange of ideas, teachers engaged in Cooperative Development dedicate their intelligence, sensitivity and energy to helping a colleague create their own, self-designed way forward. This is what we mean by Understanding in the context of Cooperative Development.

One element of the situation that makes it easier for participants to respond to these unusual pressures is that Understanding is, in itself, an active role that brings its own satisfactions in multiple ways. First, there is the satisfaction of seeing a colleague achieve self-development that would not have been possible without your involvement. Second, there is the sense of increased collegiality that comes more broadly from getting to know a person better and learning to trust them and be trusted by them. Third, Understanders get to hear ideas and possibilities that would not have been heard in the give-and-take (or cut-and-thrust) of normal discussion. Fourth, and as a result of the previous three points, the truth of the observation that *there is no one best way of teaching* becomes manifest. Cooperative Development offers a way of building community that emphasizes diversity and plurality, rather than imposed uniformity (Klette, 1997). Finally, there is the excitement of building a new skill set in an extended communicative repertoire. As with any conscious language-learning experience, the way forward involves understanding supported by practice-in-use.

So, let us look more closely at that skill-set and the active role of the Understander. (Later, we refer you to a source of practice materials and of potential partners.) We list below the set of moves on which the Understander can draw. "List," of course, carries its own danger signal. A list is necessarily sequential, but I do not mean to suggest that these moves are carried out sequentially; they are available to be used, and while the first one is essential at all times, the second is perhaps the most central of all – master that and the rest follows.

**Attending**, with eyes and face and body and gesture and heart and mind and spirit. You pay attention and let the Speaker know that you are doing so.

**Reflecting**, by which you show that you have been paying attention by reflecting back to the Speaker what you have Understood. You might say something like: "*Let me see if I've got*

*this right. You are saying . . .”* Speakers who feel well Understood feel motivated to continue. If something has been misunderstood (or perhaps was not clear in the first place), the Speaker can clarify – perhaps also for themselves. And most exciting of all is the time when the Speaker recognises an accurate Reflection of what they have said *and* simultaneously sees the new idea that follows from it.

**Thematising**, in order to raise the possibility that points raised separately by the Speaker might have some common theme underlying them. You might say, *“I hear you saying xxxxx now, and earlier you were saying yyyyy. Is that right? Are those ideas connected at all?”*

**Challenging**, in order to raise the possibility that points raised separately by the Speaker might not be coherent with each other. You might say, *“I hear you saying xxxxx at this point. I’m not sure how that fits with what I understood before, when you were saying yyyyy. Have I got those two points right?”* Note that Thematising and Challenging are two sides of the same coin and both arise from points raised by the Speaker. The Understander must be working sincerely to Understand, not to suggest or dispute. Speakers do not have to satisfy Understanders, they have to satisfy themselves.

**Focusing**, with which you encourage the Speaker to keep in mind that talk can be general, but that action needs to be specific. So you might say, *“Is there anything in what you’ve said so far that you think you’d like to go into in more depth?”*

**Goal-setting**, with which you invite the Speaker to establish a goal for themselves. You might say, *“So, coming out of what you’ve said so far, can you see a clear goal that you’d like to set yourself?”*

**Trialling**, with which you invite the Speaker to think through carefully how they intend to work in practical terms towards the goal that they have set. You might say, *“OK, if that is the goal, do you want to work on how you’re going to get there – what you’re actually going to do?”*

At this point, the Speaker will be ready to go off and implement their ideas, or will perhaps want to come back and work to clarify them some more. Not all sessions will follow through from issue-raised to plan-of-detailed-action (although Edge 2003 exemplifies one such), but that is the overall trajectory that participants are aiming for. The process is helped if participants agree to regular meetings, changing roles as appropriate.

Having attempted to describe the style, the demands, the pressures and the potential of non-judgemental discourse in Cooperative Development, it is now essential to make very clear that this is not intended as an attack on critical thinking, argument, debate, giving advice, making suggestions or any of the other essential styles of interaction that we use all the time to fuel our relationships and further our development. The point at issue is not that we should replace these forms of interaction, but that we need not allow ourselves to be limited by them. We can add to our communicative repertoire and thereby extend our potential for a style of

self-development that also enhances the experience of collegiality. Just giving advice or just making suggestions is relatively easy – after all, we do indeed do it all the time. To provide the kind of Understanding evoked above is not at all easy. But they are attitudes that can be adopted and skills that can be learned, starting from where one is with a colleague interested in giving it a try.

From those one-to-one and face-to-face beginnings, Cooperative Development has been used in a team-oriented approach to curriculum change (Butorac 2008) and has developed group formats that take the explicit goal of community-building further (Edge, 2002, Chapter 9). There are also online versions using Instant Messenger Cooperative Development (IMCD) (Boon, 2007), e-mail (EMCD) (Edge, 2011, Chapter 8) and Skype. In my own current situation, EMCD has become the mode of Cooperative Development that is most engaging my efforts and interests. I miss the in-the-moment, face-to-face energy of the original version, but find the reflective space allowed to both Speaker and Understander by the exchange of emails to be at least an adequate compensation.

This technologically low-level integration of the use of non-judgemental discourse with ICT brings my story up to date. More recently, Mariam has established a web-presence for Cooperative Development that we hope can make it more available and accessible for a greater number of people. Moreover, in aligning the potential of non-judgemental discourse with the need to integrate the use of ICT into the mainstream of language pedagogy, I believe that she is addressing one of the most pressing challenges facing early 21<sup>st</sup> century teachers. But all that is her story . . .

### **Mariam's story**

I completed my master's degree in Teaching Arabic as Foreign Language (TAFL) in 1997 at The American University in Cairo, Egypt. By then, I had concluded over 100 hours of classroom observations, and had my first in-class teaching experience. At that time, teacher education was primarily based on the "craft model" (Wallace, 1991, pp. 6-7) whereby a student-teacher was "adopted" by one or more "master" practitioners and taught the "secrets of the craft" through close apprenticeship (Stones & Morris, 1972, p. 7). Mentors not only facilitated professional learning but also offered moral support and rich insight into institutional culture. Beliefs about the profession were therefore socially constructed through the novices' engagement with their community. With the passing of time, they themselves became mentors, responsible for a younger generation of practitioners.

Unsurprisingly, one of the merits of the craft model is the strong affective bond, which develops over the years through shared lived experiences. On the other hand, one of the drawbacks of the model is the slow uptake of innovations. In contexts where the majority of veteran teachers employ minimal, if any, ICT in their classes, newer ones rarely observe the use of these resources in authentic teaching settings. There were, however, a couple of 'early

adopters' (Rogers, 2010) in my department whose contributions, as well as that of other colleagues at the university, inspired my trajectory in instructional technologies.

Early collegial collaboration involved computer-based material development for classroom use, most of which took place inside the Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) Unit. Established by the late Waheed Samy, a teacher with a personal interest in educational technologies, the small room at the end of the corridor was a hub for collaborative activity among motivated teachers. Another late colleague, Sanaa Ghanem, who had just started a private online programme for Teaching Arabic to Speakers of other Languages (TASOL), invited me to contribute to the development of instructional material. This was a significant experience that introduced me to the world of virtual learning. Both Waheed and Sanaa placed much confidence in me as a newly-qualified teacher, and from their example, I learned that failure is acceptable, risk is necessary, and embracing uncertainty is key to working with technology.

In 2001, the department received a large innovation grant, under which it was transformed into an environment of ubiquitous computing and networking. The technology-base opened up new possibilities for teaching and learning, but posed a significant challenge to many teachers as they underwent what Zhao, Pugh, Sheldon and Byers (2002) describe as "the messy process through which teachers struggle to negotiate a foreign and potentially disruptive innovation into their familiar environment" (p. 483).

During this start-up phase, I was given time release to explore further the use of digital media in Arabic language teaching. This facilitated collaboration with Marwa Mansour, a colleague from the university's academic IT services, which resulted in the development of the first Arabic language blended learning course in the institution. A handful of other teachers were taking steps towards incorporating digital media into their practice but, despite strong interpersonal ties, forays into technology largely remained an individual undertaking. Nevertheless, one year several of us got together and decided to showcase aspects of teaching Arabic with technology at an international conference (MESA, 2005). This was the first public presence of our technology-focused group of practitioners. Most importantly, collaborating for this presentation allowed us to have thoughtful discussions about our individual use of digital media and to reflect on many taken-for-granted elements of our practice. Sharing experiences in this manner introduced us to a wealth of situated practitioner experience, thereby opening up new vistas for utilising ICT in Arabic language teaching.

Despite such progress, one fact remained: the overall uptake of technology in the department was minimal. This motivated me to consider conducting large-scale research with the aim of understanding ICT integration within this ecology.

In 2006, I left teaching to start a PhD in the UK. Initially, I explored factors for adoption of technology by teachers, which resulted in an investigation of teachers' beliefs and attitudes, or what is collectively known as 'teacher cognition' (e.g., Borg, 2003; 2006), as a widely recognized factor for ICT integration (e.g., Ertmer, 2005; Ertmer, Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Sadik,

Sendurur & Sendurur, 2012). My research focused on examining the relationship between teacher cognition and technology use in the context of TASOL. Before long, I returned to my small group of technology users in Egypt to conduct fieldwork, and chose three colleagues to work closely with. Their contribution to the research was remarkable, as documented in my thesis.

With the passing of time, the project developed into a kind of collaborative research. Theoretically speaking, I was the researcher and they were the participants; however, at times the demarcation line would disappear, and we would perceive the fieldwork experience as ours rather than mine. (Attia, 2011, p. 99)

Interestingly, the accounts of the three participants called attention to the value of peer collaboration for technology integration, thereby corroborating earlier research in this area: “the importance of collaboration cannot be over-estimated: teachers need each other - for team teaching and planning, technical problem solving assistance and learning” (Granger, Morbey, Lotherington, Owston, & Wideman, 2002, p. 486). The teachers identified collegial interaction as a key source of motivation, confidence, support and learning. In describing the significance of interactions with colleagues to her ICT professional development, Dalal Abo El Seoud, one of the teachers who participated in my study, explained:

Colleagues are of major importance because I always turn to them when I want to learn something, and they ask me too. Everyone knows bits and pieces that we assist each other with, particularly, [in relation] to matters that are not complicated, nor require lengthy explanations. (Attia, 2011, p. 126)

While working on my research, I also audited modules at the university, one of which was Julian’s *The Education of Language Teachers*. There, I was introduced to Cooperative Development as a framework for teacher professional growth, and was particularly drawn to the approach’s underlying principles of sincerity, respect, and empathy. However, coming from an educational context where peer collaboration was conventionally forged through close conversations, I found Cooperative Development, grounded in non-defensive, non-judgmental communication, quite atypical. It was only after exploring the approach in further depth, and engaging with it for several months that I came to appreciate the rich potential it holds both for myself and for fellow professionals. This insight was reflected in a webinar (Attia, 2012) I conducted for teachers worldwide on the use of Cooperative Development for teacher self-development in the use of educational technologies.

As an approach to teacher collaboration, Cooperative Development can facilitate teacher integration of ICT, especially given the current speed of technological change, and the increasing pressure on many teachers to keep pace. First, being an internal growth model, the approach is based on self-directed exploration, discovery, and action, thereby empowering teachers to take responsibility for their own learning. This is of particular importance in educational settings where technology integration is primarily a personal endeavor.



Second, because Cooperative Development foregrounds discourse that is non-defensive and non-judgmental, it opens up avenues for addressing sensitive realities of technology adoption, such as time pressure, institutional culture, insecurity (Attia, 2011), uncertainty, and risk-aversion (Howard, 2013). These are matters of shared experience that teachers may prefer to work through with trusted colleagues rather than with other members of their professional community.

Third, the disciplined use of non-judgmental communication advocates working together on a regular basis over a period of time. This scheduled interaction helps teachers to develop their teaching with ICT in incremental steps, and become more familiar with the different digital tools and less anxious about using them, which is key to boosting confidence and facilitating adoption (Ertmer, 2005; Howard, 2013). In this respect, the approach offers teachers safe spaces to experiment with ICT, to take risks, and to accept both success and failure as integral to technology adoption.

Fourth, Cooperative Development is not only founded on a collegial relationship of trust and interdependence but is likely to strengthen such relationship over time. This is essential for continuous teacher development in ICT, and the expansion of communities of technology-using practitioners, within institutions and beyond.

I continued exploring the potential of Cooperative Development, and with the expansion of the approach geographically and professionally, I felt it was time to establish a virtual home for it. In 2014, I set up the website ([www.cooperative-development.com](http://www.cooperative-development.com)) to gain deeper understanding of the area, and promote closer interaction between interested professionals.

The online space comprises resources of various kinds, including introductory practice materials for pairs and groups, along with commentaries and further explanation of ideas. There are also theses and dissertations, presentations and workshops archived, in addition to a designated section for authentic Cooperative Development exchanges. As such, the space constitutes a portal for all the work that has been completed in this area to date, and a reference for anyone who may wish to carry it forward.

At a more interpersonal level, the website hosts a growing international network of professionals interested in the use of Cooperative Development. My aim is to see it evolve as a place for sharing experiences, exchanging ideas, and collaborating on various areas (e.g., training, research, public engagement). The community space also constitutes a meeting point for potential Speakers and Understanders to find partners as needed, which should prove to be particularly beneficial to professionals who may feel isolated due to geography or institutional structure. Considering the global influence of the English language, we are aware of the dangers of possible linguistic isolation, and therefore welcome contributions in other languages.

## **Conclusion**

In this collaborative chapter, we have combined our individual biographies in order to bring

together a number of interacting themes regarding communication, technology, innovation and collaboration as they contribute to continuing personal and professional development for teachers as individuals, colleagues and communities:

- Communication lies at the heart of community. Furthermore, a shared, conscious effort to extend communicative repertoire can enhance that sense of community.
- The demands of ICT in education will grow at an accelerating rate, placing increasing pressure on teachers to engage in on-going experimentation and risk-taking.
- Innovation is facilitated when colleagues feel supported by a sense of mutual regard and encouraged to develop their strengths.
- Cooperative Development offers a form of collaboration based on a respect for plurality, in which interdependence supersedes individual isolation and group conformity.

In sum, we consider our proposal for communicative innovation as the central message of this chapter. We have focused on technology, because we see the need to innovate in the area of ICT becoming an ever more pressing requirement for teachers. The communicative innovation we propose can provide a way to respond to the need for technological innovation, as well as to other needs that the community comes to perceive.

As we know, this text will grow old. That is the nature of the products of the print revolution in communication technology. By the time you read this chapter, however, the website described above will have further developed to serve the purposes of its users. That is the nature of the digital revolution in communication technology. The challenge before us is to harness the potential of this latter revolution in order to give a new dimension to what Rogers (1983) meant by '*freedom to learn.*' Wherever you see your own trajectory leading you with regard to ICT, collaboration and innovation, we hope that this chapter might encourage you to join us in the exploration of the usefulness of non-defensive, non-judgmental communication.

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