

Maximizing our Work: Teacher Collaboration in the Ninth-Grade Academy

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Promising practices...

As high school teachers, we often talk about the difficulty of motivating students, equipping them with the tools needed to engage with complex text, and utilizing academic language in the classroom. We want our students to be prepared to compete in a global economy that requires clear written and spoken communication. 2017 PARCC scores for Rio Grande High School, indicate the student body lacks proficiency in the areas of grade-level vocabulary usage in reading comprehension relative to the scores of students in other districts and states. Ninth-grade students at the school scored significantly lower than students across the district in reading vocabulary, with 21% proficient as opposed to 30% across the district, 33% in the state, and 41% cross-state average. In reading vocabulary, 56% of students did not meet or partially met expectations, as compared to 45% of students in the district. Such outcomes can negatively affect students' ability to enter into careers where the expected language is academic English. Furthermore, many students at Rio Grande speak a home language other than English, so they are acquiring both basic English communication skills and academic language.

I am currently an English 9 Special Education teacher at Rio Grande High School and the leader of one of the ninth-grade professional learning communities (PLC). The ninth-grade academy teacher-collaboration time is cross teamed, meaning we meet with teachers of all content areas. The advantage to this grouping is that our collaboration time can be spent not only discussing individual student concerns and interventions, but also on planning for the use of instructional techniques as a teacher team.

At the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year, Rio Grande High School was selected by Dual Language Education of New Mexico to participate in their *Building Community Partnership to Support Dual*

Language Learners Kellogg grant. During the second year of the grant, the ninth-grade PLC had the opportunity to work directly with DLeNM through

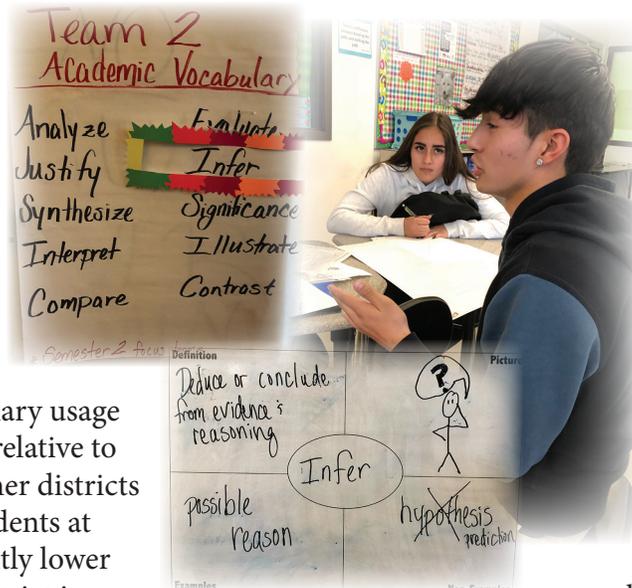
Contextualized Learning for Access, Validation, Equity and Success—CLAVES™, with Adrian Sandoval and Victoria Tafoya as our facilitators. CLAVES™ serves as a framework that provides the entire school community with the professional learning needed to create an environment of differentiated, inclusive, and validating instruction that serves culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students, with specific

emphasis on English learners (ELs).

(See *Soleado*—Fall and Winter 2017 issues, soleado.dlenm.org for more information.)

Our CLAVES™ training included learning and reflecting on strategies and activities designed to support CLD students, as well as establishing commitments to use mutually agreed upon strategies with our students across all content areas. Additionally, Adrian provided support and worked directly with members of our collaboration team on lesson planning and ways to incorporate the Eight Pathways of Contextualized Learning.

As leader of one of the ninth-grade PLCs, it is my job to create the agendas and facilitate our meetings. One of our first tasks was to review our students' assessment data described earlier. As we saw it, we needed to close the gap in student achievement in the area of academic language. That became the focus of our problem of practice. We wanted to build confidence in the communication and collaboration skills of our students to prepare them for challenging college and career experiences. We hoped our focus would have the effect of increasing student achievement on standardized tests. The CLAVES™ framework became a great complement to the teaching team's focus for the year.



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We began our discussions by asking why academic language is so important. We learned that academic language is important because students who master it are more likely to be successful in academic and professional settings. Students who do *not* learn academic language struggle academically and are at a higher risk of dropping out of school (Scarcella, 2017). With graduation rates at 66% in 2016, Rio Grande HS must make every effort to engage students in learning and demonstrating academic language and thinking (Getting Better, 2017).

By November, our team was fully engaged in the VISITAS™ process—visiting classrooms, gathering data, and talking about what we observed. (For more information on VISITAS™, see *Soleado—Winter 2016*.) Our collaboration group decided on academic language as a “look for” in our class visits; it met our initial focus, and aligned with many of the CLAVES™ Pathways. Our discussions paved the way for concrete next steps toward our goal of improving our students’ access to and use of academic language. The ninth-grade team made the following commitments.

- Participate in a book study of Walsh and Sattes’ book, *Questioning for Classroom Discussion* (ASCD, 2015).
- Conduct formal conversations with students about the goal of student academic language use, explicitly explaining what it is and how we can support one another in learning and practicing it.
- Include many opportunities for students to use academic language in speaking.
- Use sentence stems as scaffolds to support students’ language use.
- Intentionally plan and use interactive strategies, focusing on the Turn and Talk protocol.
- Begin lesson study, using DLeNM as a resource.

To include the voices of our students, and to begin our conversations regarding the importance of academic language, our ninth-grade PLC decided to collect data on key cognitive vocabulary and language functions. Student self-assessment surveys were created to assess their perceived and actual knowledge of 10 grade-level vocabulary words. The 10 words with the percentage of students correctly identifying the definition in a multiple choice assessment are as follows: compare–73%, analyze–72%, contrast–66%, evaluate–59%,

significance–51%, justify–47%, interpret–42%, infer–38%, illustrate–37%, synthesize–34%.

Armed with this data, the team agreed to try several of the strategies shared with them as part of the CLAVES™ training. Towards the end of the school year, the teachers developed a follow-up survey asking the students if they felt the strategies used during the school year supported a better understanding of the vocabulary. Here are some of the students’ responses:

- I feel like I can better understand the vocabulary terms because we went over them in most of our [content] classes multiple times.
- The best academic vocabulary instruction ... was conversations and analyzing the vocab words.

We also asked students what their favorite activities were. Here are a few of the responses:

- My favorite was *speed dating* because [we were able to] interact with each student as they go down the line.
- My favorite group activity was the *consensus frame* because it was fun and the topics were more real-life relatable. I also liked how we could [express] our own opinions and what we thought about the topic.

Many of the student comments were positive, and it became apparent that students liked coming to the class because they were able to share their thoughts with classmates. This kind of collaborative environment takes real work and support in the classroom, but as a PLC we were able to witness an increase in productive academic language use. Our goal was to create a classroom experience where students are encouraged to use higher-level language in speaking and writing.

Teachers in our PLC now have open conversations about the importance of using academic language and better understand their role in reinforcing academic vocabulary with the students. The VISITAS™ protocol allowed each teacher to visit other teachers’ classrooms. The look fors focused teachers’ conversation and generated excitement about analyzing our own practices. Not only did students benefit from the intentional focus of the



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No one is held accountable until they are trained. This becomes an issue when you are training your whole school and some teachers haven't yet been trained. It's unfair for anyone to be evaluated or held accountable for using strategies if they haven't been through the 6-day training.

It's hard to be the only one trained on your team. We have moved to training at least three teachers per team (two grade-level teachers and an EL teacher or support teacher). If you are the lone voice of GLAD® on a grade-level team, tensions can rise.

Model, model, model, but then let go. If all you do is model without a plan for the teacher to take over, they might continue to ask you to model and never take ownership of the strategies. Set up systems so that they understand what to do after you leave.

Focus the follow up. If you want continued success with implementation, you must provide follow up. After different attempts, this is what worked for us:

1. Google survey the whole staff with miniworkshop choices (strategies to start a unit, the Expository Strand, writing from a Comparative Input chart ...)
2. For district-level professional days, give teachers planning time. Offer refreshers on certain strategies in the back of the room, but let teachers plan and create materials with like-content teachers.
3. For individual teachers, use an observation form for what you DO see, not what you don't.
4. Offer multiple ways to support: modeling, coteaching, coaching from the back of the room and offering suggestions on a white board, or teacher-selected focused observations.

Along with DLeNM, ACPS trained 100 teachers last year and now have over 220 teachers trained in five schools. We are planning four more trainings next year, incorporating a new school, and starting a cohort of trainers-in-training. This year I will support district-wide implementation of Project GLAD®. We are on our way to providing access to language and content for thousands of our most vulnerable students.

The Orange County Department of Education (OCDE) holds full license to Project GLAD®. DLeNM provides Project GLAD® trainings under the direction of the OCDE Project GLAD® National Training Center.

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PLC, but my colleagues reacted positively to our work together. Here are some of their comments:

- I loved the focus on academic vocabulary. I liked that we had a word of the week and all focused on the same word and how it was used in the different content areas. I enjoyed VISITAS™, seeing how others utilize academic language and seeing the students in other environments.
- Breaking down the VISITAS™ afterwards was helpful in seeing what we do as a whole and what we need to work on.
- I have been in many collaboration groups over the years ... and this year has been very productive. The VISITAS™ experience was a good learning opportunity. The protocol for debriefing after the visits was educational and made teachers (including me) think about our strategies and how to improve, whether we were new or veteran teachers.

As one of the PLC leaders, I was proud of the ninth-grade team's focus on academic language and maintaining a collaborative team that contributed to the overall functioning of the school.

References

- Getting Better.* (2017, January 16). Retrieved from Albuquerque Public Schools: <http://www.aps.edu/news/getting-better>
- Scarcella, D. R. (2017). *Academic language for English language learners.* Retrieved from Colorin Colorado: www.ColorinColorado.org/webcasts
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In the fall of 2008, DLeNM published the first issue of Soleado under the direction of Materials Development Coordinator, Dee McMann. In the 10 years that have followed, Dee's considerable work ethic, vision, and expertise have made Soleado a leading publication in our field, featuring articles from practioners, experts, and researchers from across the country. Dee was also the driving force in the creation of DLeNM's online clearinghouse, FUENTE365 and lead editor for the books and monographs published by Fuente Press. Her contribution to our organization and our field are without parallel.

This past summer, Dee officially entrusted Soleado to Ruth Kriteman, mentoring, guiding, and encouraging her to maintain the quality everyone has come to expect. Ruth and the DLeNM team are enormously grateful for Dee's inspiring example. Happy retirement, Dee! ¡Te queremos mucho!

