IMAGINING NEW WORLDS TOGETHER: LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY TO DECOLONIZE TRANSCULTURAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT: This paper describes the work of teachers from United States and Belize, who took the opportunity that COVID's challenges presented to collaborate in building professional development for teachers in both locations. Leveraging both technology and relationships, educators representing a variety of skill sets, schools, and positions in Belize and in the United States, co-created seminars that were live, interactive and responsive to teacher needs in real time. We sought feedback during this professional development in real time as we have continued to follow up with participants regarding the strengths and barriers of this work. We believe the meeting of our minds and screens during these times of COVID is testimony to the power of collective struggle and triumph through our shared vision, our desire to continuously improve our teaching practice, and our commitment to collaborate as we build an increasingly knowledgeable and united teaching coalition that will continue to shape our shared future.

Keywords: professional development, collaboration, remote learning, technology, transnational, COVID

Introduction – Our World, Our Work

The morning of Monday, March 23, 2020, left all of us breathless. While across the globe, over a billion of our planet's young learners walked away from classrooms (UNESCO, 2020), we still grappled with the emptiness of our *own* space.

This is the story of ourselves. We are classroom teachers from Belize and the United States, who took the opportunity which COVID's challenges presented to collaborate in building not only professional development for teachers in both locations, but also to find renewed sense of solidarity in our call. We began our work together in 2007 as classroom teachers from the United States and from Belize through the *Belize Education Project*. It was in this context that William (our third author) was inspired in Belize to co-create professional development via our shared screens. Reaching our students in this strange way was novel for all of us. With the medium as the messenger, we wondered if we could use this newly discovered tool itself, to understand its power to reach our students. With the new potentials, which rested in our fingertips at the keyboard, a camera, a microphone and a commitment to literacy, our game was transformed. Teachers from

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Central America and the United States were on equal ground as we began this new journey.

Our colleagues told us that they wanted to learn this novel platform in a way that was interactive with their peers, a way we could all be in fellowship as we embarked on uncharted waters. Debbie and William drew on a deep knowledge of technology that they already possessed to lead the co-creation of a new kind of professional development. Debbie is *Belize Education Project's* Director of Technology Development, as well as the STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math) teacher at her school in Colorado and was recently trained to be a Google Certified Trainer. William had been a leader for technology for his school and colleagues in Belize long before COVID made headlines.

Two weeks of classes were created via Google Meets which ranged from entry levels to advanced levels in a variety of platforms. We also drew on the expertise of Esther Valdez, *Belize Education Project's* Director of Instructional Leadership, to address our response to crises. The sessions were created in Google Meet, which allowed teachers in Belize and the United States to be in real time and interactive. Not only were we receiving new content together, but we were asking questions, sharing fears, challenges, hopes, and triumphs with each other. Each session could build on the previous session with input from our participants clarifying where we were and what we were ready for next, *together*.

Conceptual Framework – Leveraging Solidarity and Technology to Engage in Decolonizing Strategies and to Co-Create New Possibilities

We were clear that the best and most effective learning occurs within a community. While we had developed relationships with each other for over a decade, the lockdown forced us to leverage technology to connect in new ways. Scholars wrote about the power we already found so formidable. Wenger (2002) noted "learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing" (p. 3). Yet, even as our work together had predated a decade, we still yearned for more effective collaboration. We were aware that we inhabited different economic realities, life histories, and cultural influences that could inhibit our collaboration. We considered the words of Said (1989) when he wrote that we can no longer ignore the context of colonialism in our work (p. 51). We realized we were still experiencing the effects that centuries of colonialism had, and continued to, create, even in our efforts to create professional development. Shore (2004) wrote that, "adult education is part of the practices of colonialism" (p. 118). Shore (2004) continued to challenge us to consider the implications of colonialism in our own professional development. "The challenge is to identify the workings of colonialism in adult education theories, even when they appear to be absent or cosigned to history" (p. 118). We knew to be most effective- we would also need to work toward disrupting old assumptions of who held what knowledge, and what knowledge had value. In this courageous work, we knew authentic dialogue and relationships along with the vulnerability of COVID's impact on our instruction, were both ways in which we could begin to humanize our work.

While we understood the impact of colonialism/post-colonialism on identity is immense, we also recognized that, so too, is human ability to transform. In this regard, Holland, Lachicotte, Cain, & Skinner (1998) invited us "to respect humans as social and cultural creatures and therefore bounded, yet to recognize the processes whereby human collectives and individuals often move themselves – led by hope, desperation, or even playfulness...from one set of socially and culturally formed subjectivities to another" (pp. 6- 7). That possibility carried tremendous significance in our work. We also found inspiration in Diversi and Moreira's (2009) words as we employed more egalitarian dialogue and collaboration. We hoped that we, too, could embody their definition of decolonizing strategies which, "signifies actions, movement, process, dialogue, and the space between colonial and postcolonial" (p. 207). In this way, the vulnerability we found in these new "playing fields" of COVID lockdown caused our work to become authentic and more egalitarian. We were in this together.

We believe we became what Wenger (2002) described as a "force to be reckoned with," as we had become a group of people who shared visions and passions, and then co-created new learnings, new knowledge, and new practices, which Wenger (2002) explained held the "key to real transformation – the kind that has real effect on people's lives" (p. 85). Within these frameworks of deepened relationships, embracing decolonizing pedagogy, and a commitment to co-creating new spaces to inhabit together, we built effective and transcultural professional development.

Approach – Participatory Action Research

As co-creators of this professional development, we also wanted to better understand our work. In this, we engaged in Participatory Action Research (PAR). Heron and Reason (1997) explained the purpose of PAR is "to join with fellow humans in collaborative forms of inquiry" (p. 276). They continued to explain the "primary purpose" of PAR is for "the service of human flourishing" (p. 281). Put another way, our work together was in the service of lifting all of us. Together, we created this research question in hopes of enhancing future work co-creating professional development:

How can the COVID lockdown restrictions provide opportunities in professional development to deepen relationships, disrupt colonial pedagogy, and transform our practice across cultural lines of difference?

We collected our data through surveys, interviews, and discussion groups via our Google Meets, along with our own field notes of what was happening right in front of us. This data was collected on four separate occasions including: 1) two weeks before our professional development, 2) during our professional development, 3) six weeks after our professional development, and 4) seven months after the professional development in January of 2021.

As we drew on the many voices of our colleagues, multiple perspectives were included in order to achieve what Bazeley (2013) described as the use of triangulation which

involved "independently obtaining one or more alternative sources of data" (p. 406). Just as significant to this research was the attention to "trustworthiness" which Moss (2004) described "as an art …where multiple voices or multivoicedness is allowed to flourish" (p. 363). Using a simple thematic analysis, we compiled the data and noted themes that emerged from our data.

Findings and Discussion

As themes emerged, we came to appreciate the potency that was unleashed in the meeting of our minds, our hearts, and yes, our laptop screens, too. Our colleagues appreciated finally seeing each other after months of lockdown. Utilizing our screens, we crossed borders and cultures to share our frustrations, fears, and disappointments, as well as our greatest hopes and triumphs of teaching in this new way. Seeing faces solidified us as a learning community. As Audra noted, "We were able to see your faces, which I appreciated so much!" (Audra, interview, January 21, 2021). Interacting with each other in real time as we learned together was also powerful. Zilpa commented, "We could communicate with each other! We were helping each other. It was like being in a classroom across the world" (Zilpa, interview, January 20, 2012).

As we leveraged the bonds technology afforded us, we drew on our connections to ensure content was delivered in a way everybody could access the information. Brenda noted, "It was delivered in real time addressing what we needed. If we had any concerns, we could quickly ask and get an answer" (Brenda, survey, January 20, 2021).

New Practices for Teaching

As we appreciated the effectiveness of our virtual professional development, we wondered if these new skills could empower us to more effectively reach our students? Our data suggested it could. Evangelina told us, "With Google Classroom, I learned children can write in a book, share images, collect data, draw, or insert images and download or share!!" (Evangelina, survey, August 23, 2020). Carmita also noted, "These will be of great benefit for our students to make learning more engaging" (Carmita, survey, August 23, 2021). Seesaw (a platform for primary school educators) also captured the imagination of primary teachers. Carmita noted, "Seesaw can help us individualize students' needs by providing specific instruction and feedback." She elaborated that "Students can become creative. They can take pictures and videos and include it on their projects. Parents can share or see what the child is learning as well" (Carmita, survey, August 23, 2020). Emy, too, explained her enthusiasm, "I used Seesaw with my students to record their reading. They had fun and enjoyed every part of it!" (Emy, survey, August 23, 2020). New tools were ushering in new possibilities to reach our students.

Seven months after our professional development we collected our last set of data. By then the Belize Ministry of Education began providing "packages" of paper and pencil work for their students and broadcasting radio school with prerecorded lessons at specific times for students (Kirshner, 2020). While these efforts were significant, the teachers

appreciated the additional strategies. Eli explained, "the packages weren't so useful, as they were being returned incomplete. But with Google Meet, students could tell us what the problem is" (Eli, Facebook messaging, January 21, 2021). Eli also commented, "If we didn't have this technology, I don't know how we would even connect with students, since we haven't seen them in a year. At the moment we are reaching more than 50% of our students with technology." (Eli, interview, January 23, 2021). Significantly, Majorie also noted, "…Google Meet - it is a free tool!" (Majorie, survey, January 20, 2021). With creativity, resolve, and new knowledge of technology available to us, we co-created new ways of helping teachers reach learners in quarantine.

Beyond Classroom Practice

As new skills impacted the delivery of instruction to our students, our colleagues leveraged these skills beyond their own classrooms. Emy explained, "I have used my knowledge to teach my husband how to use Google Meet for meetings with his colleagues and family members" (Emy, survey, January 20, 2021). Evette commented, "I am able to teach my son to use these to present his for high school" (Evette, survey, January 20, 2021). Students across borders were also impacted. Young learners who lived on the Guatemalan side of the border could not even get the paper/pencil packages, as nobody was permitted to cross the border. Brenda told us:

> I am using Google Classroom with students across the border. I upload work for them on Mondays and allow then to work, send them tutorials, videos, feedback, and grades. Parents commented that they too are learning alongside their children. Not all is perfect, but everyone is getting there. (Brenda, survey, January 20, 2021)

The content of our professional development was reaching and impacting people beyond those who were in our virtual "room," with us during our summer professional development.

Meeting of the Heart

Finally, the data reflected we were experiencing a meeting of our hearts as well. As Emy noted, "every teacher got a chance to express how we have coped through these times of uncertainty and lockdown due to COVID-19" (Emy, survey, August 23, 2020). The fellowship we found through these sessions not only lifted us, but empowered us to lift others around us, including our students. Angelina explained that the sessions "motivated one another to keep moving along, despite the difficult situation." Evette echoed Angelina's reflections:

> I was able to share some anxiety caused by the changes of these difficult times. Sharing made me feel that I was not alone in being impacted by the effect of these changes happening right now. Being a part of this group discussion helped us comfort each other with faith and assurance that we will get through any challenges. (Evette, survey august, 23, 2020)

That we were not alone became clear to all of us.

As we embarked on this new journey in solidary, we were not only lifted ourselves, but we were also empowered to lift our students. Jesse explained that this

> crisis is exposing kids to some real heavy issues on the news, radio or internet, as well as personal grief of loss. This session helped me know how to help a family, a student, or each other during the grief and loss. (Jesse, Survey, August 23, 2020)

We gained a renewed sense of strength and a feeling that we could better support each other and our students.

As the months of teaching and learning remotely in the midst of COVID restrictions marched on, the impact of our professional development was sustained. Evette explained that she *still* felt transformed by our work, that she still drew from having built, "emotional connections with other teachers" as well as the "ideas of activities that lessen COVID stress" (Evette, Survey, January 20, 2021). Jessy, too, noted that months later she was still integrating, "what I learnt in the Building Emotional Connections session" (Jessy, Survey, January 20, 2021). The results of our work appeared to be significant and sustained.

Barriers and Limitations

As we were inspired by the impact of our work together, we were also clear about the limitations of reaching our learners remotely through technology. We were all too cognizant of the continued lack of internet access and devices in the community, as well as sufficient knowledge and skills for both families and teachers to effectively use technology.

Our colleagues conveyed that internet accessibility, along with access to a device, is a barrier for their remote learners. Emy noted that many "students don't have a device or internet connection." She was dismayed as she continued to explain because of this lack, "I was unable to practice any of the platforms and ideas discussed in the training sessions" (Emy, survey, January 20, 2021). Sonia also noted that "availability of internet" was especially challenging to students who "live in very remote areas" (Sonia, survey, January 20, 2021). Without access to internet or sufficient devices, this platform could not reach all students.

Our data also indexed insufficient knowledge and inadequate know-how for both families and in teachers. Nelia explained, "Parents not able to do 'the digital' and most speak Spanish" (Nelia, survey, January 20, 2021). Areli explained her own challenges coming into the sessions with little background in technology:

> I faced many challenges with using the basic tools - that is forgetting to turn off my mic and camera. I am very shy with cameras. I prefer not to use it and when I do, I feel very uncomfortable with it. Also, I have had problems when using my phone. When the presenter is asking for comments or ideas and I don't know

where to go to make a comment. I am not a computer literate person. I can learn to use apps and tools but at a slower pace. (Areli, survey, January 23, 2021)

Areli told us, "other participants made so many comments about what is being discussed, and I was so afraid to comment because they made me feel like I was the odd one out." (Areli, survey, January 20, 2021). All of us became vulnerable in the lack of technology skills which were being required from us as teachers.

In that vulnerability, there were painful moments and feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and frustration. There were moments for ***all*** of us when the challenges felt too great, the discouragement felt too over overwhelming for us to continue.

Future Direction

Despite (and maybe even driven by) our understanding of barriers, we forged ahead. New tools and deepened connections inspired us. Yes, we were still grieving the emptiness of classroom walls. Yes, we were clear on the barriers of connectivity, devices, and our own fledgling skills. Yet, we also still felt the presence of our students. We could feel their tug from within their own dwellings, and the need for learning to continue.

Our data also reflected optimism. Marie declared, "I am learning and exploring with my students. Every day is a new day and opportunity to learn" (Marie, survey, August 23, 2020). Majorie commented, "these tools can help us navigate the challenges of distance learning." She continued, "we're committed to helping students continue learning outside of school" (Majorie, survey, August 23, 2020). Drawing a chuckle from her colleagues, Areli declared, "If God spares life, I will try my best to do at least one or two 'meets' for this term!" Our colleagues entered the school year with determination and emerging skills to reach remote learners. Abel even noted how he was reaching students in Guatemala, "We decided to get our students across the border on board with the Google Classroom" (Abel, interview, January 25, 2021). Eli expanded:

> Hopefully we can build from two days a week now (connecting with students on line). In the near future we can extend it to three days, then to four days! Right now, we are perfecting the system. We know that not everybody can connect. But hopefully as days go by, parents will find a way, because that is what they want. We will move forward in that direction, so we can meet as many students as possible. Right now, from the 60 (students) that we have, sometimes we have 35 or 38 on the Google Meet. Last week we had 45! It gets better all the time! (Eli, interview, January 23, 2021)

The data indicated that not only did the content have staying power, but it also opened new possibilities and even more significantly, new ways of imagining possibilities for us as educators.

Implications of Research: Our Future is Bright

We came to understand two implications of our research. First, we saw the power of so many more partners "in the room" collaborating to build professional development. Second, we cemented our understanding of the importance of fellowship in each other as we transform our practice in the context of decolonizing strategies.

As we were compelled into new ways of collaborating, our eyes opened to the possibilities of who we included in our virtual room. While this technology existed before, now we had no other option besides meeting through our screens. It changed our game. William (the third author) explained the collaboration of this professional development:

> We consulted each other as administrators, as teachers on the field, and as the BEP board. We came together and derived a plan. The teachers gave their input, the administrators gave input, the BEP board gave their visions. So, we built that platform, and put it into place. Everybody did their part, and it was such an effective workshop. Now, I think *that* is the base to continue building. (William, interview, August 17, 2020)

Planning professional development will now be inclusive in ways we never imagined before quarantines and lock downs. Our work will be better for it. We believe other educators involved in creating professional development can also benefit from leveraging technology to more fully include all stakeholders.

As teachers found ways to connect during the crisis of COVID, we witnessed our shared visions within our relationships collectively transform our practice. Teacher educators across the globe can benefit from deepened understanding and commitment to nurturing the cross-cultural fellowship and collaboration between teachers as learning communities. We believe they, too, will find the kind of transformation that has a formidable impact on people's lives.

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