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**An Expansive Learning Model to Explore Teachers' Collaboration for Student
Success**

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Abstract

This brief uses Engeström's (2015) theory of expansive learning as a theoretical model for understanding how educators use collaboration as a site for practicing progressive pedagogy. This study illuminates how teachers at a small, progressive urban high school understand their learning. They believe that learning leads to *artisanal teaching*, which they define as: 1) having ownership of teaching, curriculum, and thinking; 2) mobilizing progressive pedagogy for authenticity in teaching and learning; 3) meeting students' needs; and 4) promoting an environment for themselves and their students to develop trusting, asset-based, critical, and analytical thinking.

The aim of this brief is to position Engeström's (2015) theory of expansive learning as a theoretical model for understanding how educators use collaboration as a process for practicing their progressive pedagogy. Progressive pedagogy weaves together a commitment to social justice within a democratic school environment that recognizes the distinctive needs and interests of each student as they operate within the whole school community (Little & Ellison, 2015). Creating a student-centered environment is the central notion of progressive pedagogy, and due to the individuality of each learner, is difficult to enact. Every student comes to school with a unique combination of strengths, weaknesses, interests, and experiences. Progressive educators work to understand these factors for each student, while simultaneously creating a sense of community where individual students learn to balance their own strengths and needs with the strengths and needs of others.

This brief focuses on the role of teachers as collaborative learners as they design environments where students can achieve success that is measured by setting and achieving personal goals. Situated within a yearlong ethnographic study of a small, progressive, private, urban high school, Castanea's (pseudonym) administrators schedule the school week with specific time set aside for students to set goals and for teachers to collaborate with one another to help students achieve those goals. This is done through an advisory system. Each teacher is an advisor for 6-10 students. Advisories meet together for 25 minutes each day. During this time, advisors and students set and monitor educational and behavioral goals.

Additionally, the advisors participate in Support Team and Feedback Meetings. The Director of Learning Support (DLS) has a regular, rotating schedule of Feedback Meetings every week with each of the different teams of teachers at the school. Each week, the Feedback Meetings focus on the students in a different set of advisories. During these meetings, teachers report on the academics, behavior, participation, and emotional state of each student in that week's agenda of advisories.

The DLS takes the Feedback Meeting data and presents it to the respective advisor during individual Support Team Meetings. Through this process, the DLS and the advisor, with help from the clinical social work team, collaborate to understand how each advisee is progressing with his or her goals, and how they can continue to grow. The DLS's goal is to facilitate a productive discussion about each student, both as an individual and as a member of the school community, in order to equitably provide support for the unique issues that each student is dealing with in a way that does not disrupt the classroom climate of decency and trust.

For my dissertation, I conducted over 40 hours of participant observation in Feedback and Support Team Meetings. Additionally, I observed classes and advisories and conducted individual and focus group interviews with teachers and administrators. Through my analysis I sought to understand the nature of learning that occurred among Castanea faculty during these meetings. It became clear that the teachers, advisors and the DLS saw their main objective was to create an individualized plan for each student to meet their educational goals.

Engeström (2011) explains that, “in expansive learning, learners learn something that is not there yet. In other words, the learners construct a new object and concept in practice” (p. 87). Everyone involved in the advisory system works to help students set and achieve goals. The nature of goal setting is to push students to achieve something they had not been able to do previously, in other words – something that does not exist. Thus, a goal-setting objective can be seen as an expansive learning objective. Therefore, this theory is useful to understand how educators learn collaboratively to help students reach their goals. In this model, learning occurs as a subject (in this case, the advisor) navigates conflicts with others, with existing rules and practices, with the workload and division of labor, with the non-human objects they work with, and within one's self.

The main conflicts that I observed were the advisor interacting with the rules, the community, the division of labor, and internally as they balanced their roles as teacher and advisor. These conflicts are explained pictorially in Figure 1. Castanea faculty must constantly negotiate their roles as teachers and as advisors. In doing so, they have to collaborate through the advisory system to monitor student improvement. The iterative nature of this process can be seen through the expansive learning model, and the subsequent learning can be studied as teachers work through conflicts in other nodes in the system.

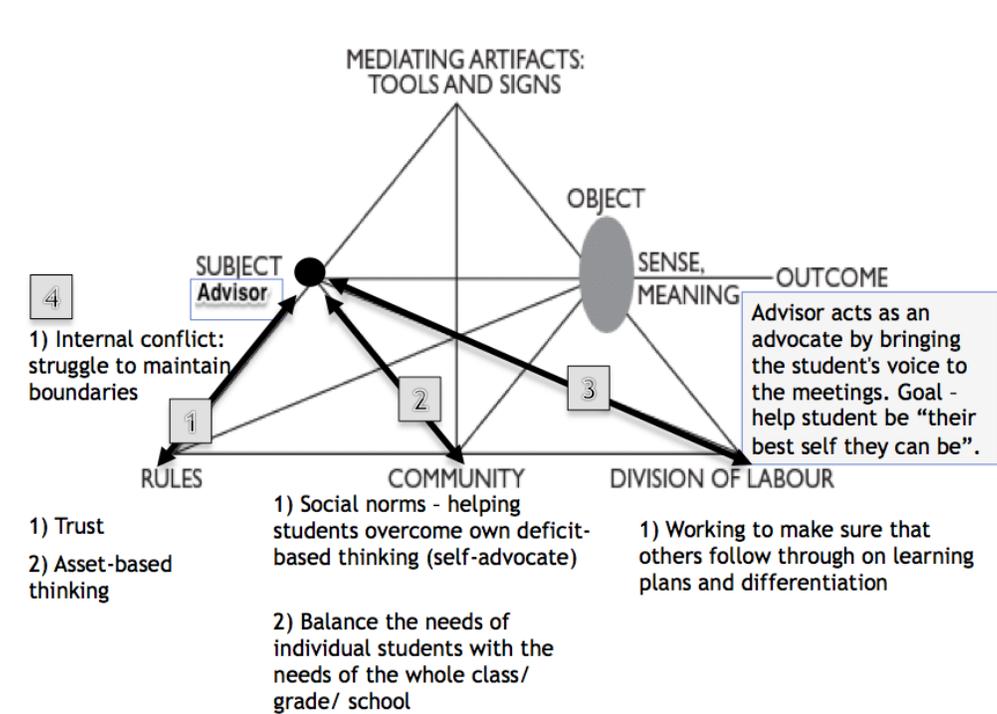


Figure 1. Common conflicts that advisor negotiate in the advisory activity system. Adapted from "The Structure of a Human Activity System (Engeström, 2009, p. 55).

As Castanea educators navigate their professional roles as advisor and teacher, they are constantly expanding the boundaries of their progressive practice. The conflicts they negotiate with the advisory rules, the community, their division of labor, and within their own teaching push them to regularly consider the role they play in providing democratic, socially-just education that is both student-centered and mindful of the school community. Castanea teachers feel that this open and ongoing skill development encourages them be “*artisanal teachers*.” They define artisanal teaching as: 1) having ownership of teaching, curriculum, thinking; 2) mobilizing progressive pedagogy for authenticity in teaching and learning; 3) meeting students’ needs; and 4) promoting an environment for themselves and their students to develop trusting, asset-based, critical, and analytical thinking.

A natural progression for the implications of studying teacher collaborative learning is to understand the systems and processes of progressive educators at other schools to further test the connection between teachers’ expansive learning, progressive pedagogy, and artisanal teaching.

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Author Biography

Mollie Gambone is a fourth year PhD candidate in the Educational Leadership Development concentration. Her dissertation is an ethnographic study of a small, progressive, private, urban school. In it, she focuses on the role that teachers and teacher collaboration plays in sustaining progressive reform by creating an atmosphere of community at the school. Apart from conducting her own research, Mollie also serves as the Graduate Assistant for the School of Education's Critical Conversations in Urban Education (CCUE). Previously, Mollie served as the Assistant Capstone Coordinator. In both 2014 and 2015 Mollie won the School of Education's Student Leadership and Service award.

Before coming to studying at Drexel, Mollie earned her Master's from SUNY Buffalo, a graduate certificate in teaching ESOL from Juniata University, and a BA in English and Secondary Teaching Certification from Shippensburg University. She has 12 years experience as a K-12 English language and literature teacher in the United States, Ecuador, Turkey, Bangladesh, and Honduras. When Mollie has free time, she enjoys traveling, scuba diving, reading, and having picnics.