

# Teacher Collaboration Praxis: Conflicts, Borders, and Ideologies From a Micropolitical Perspective

La práctica colaborativa entre docentes: conflictos, fronteras e ideologías desde una perspectiva micropolítica

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This paper looks at a feature of teacher collaboration within Achinstein's (2002) micropolitics of collaboration but from an intrapersonal perspective. Results discussed feature issues of conflict, borders, and ideologies within each participating teacher rather than between teachers. Unresolved or unacknowledged intrapersonal conflict might lead to interpersonal conflict of the type that does not enrich collaborative efforts. Findings from this study reveal that participating teachers did experience intrapersonal conflicts that fit within Achinstein's micropolitical framework. These intrapersonal conflicts were not regarded as aberrant or pathological behavior, but as a natural effect of collaboration and growth.

*Key words:* Collaboration, computer mediated instruction, intrapersonal conflict, micropolitical theory, professional development.

En este artículo se analiza un rasgo de la colaboración entre profesores utilizando la micropolítica de la colaboración desde la perspectiva intrapersonal de Achinstein. Los resultados incluyen temas como los conflictos, fronteras e ideologías de cada profesor participante en lugar de los surgidos entre profesores. Un conflicto intrapersonal no resuelto o no reconocido podría conducir a un conflicto interpersonal que no enriquece los esfuerzos de colaboración. Los resultados de este estudio revelan que los profesores participantes sí experimentaron conflictos intrapersonales que encajan en el marco de la micropolítica de Achinstein. Estos conflictos intrapersonales no se consideraron como un comportamiento aberrante o patológico, sino como un efecto natural de la colaboración y el crecimiento.

*Palabras clave:* colaboración, conflicto intrapersonal, desarrollo profesional, educación mediada por computadora, teoría micropolítica.

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## Introduction

The study reported in this paper focuses on teacher collaboration from an *intrapersonal* perspective. The study was a facet of a larger project on the design, implementation, and evaluation of two principle research courses in the English language teaching (ELT) undergraduate (bachelors' level) program in the school of modern languages (FML) of a public university in Mexico. The overall focus was on professional development through collaboration related to the formation of researchers, both teachers and students, in line with the increased focus on research in Mexico and institutionality (Weiss, 2004).

As part of their five year ELT program, students are required to do a final research project. That and the larger two year project mentioned evaluated the viability of the course design and delivery system based on various qualitative and quantitative outcomes (Kirkwood & Price, 2006; Nachmias, 2002). Such an evaluation generated a number of research topics related to teacher collaboration and course design. One of those topics is the one reported in this paper: the collaboration processes of three teachers, presented below.

Collaboration and networking have generated an overall increasing interest in different disciplines such as sociology and education (Muijs, Ainscow, Chapman, & West, 2011). Much of this literature in education focuses on the collaboration in schools, between institutions and in communities or groups either in pre-service or in-service teaching education programs which prepare teachers for the reform processes at different educational levels. However, there is a need to study, "the influence of personal relationships on changes in instruction in more contexts" (McCarthy, Woodard, & Kang, 2012, p. 54) and both interpersonal relationships as well as intrapersonal perspectives on these on-going collaboration processes. The sense in

which we use the term in this paper is on a micro level: Three teachers working together—within the "teacher professional community" (Achinstein, 2002, p. 421)—representing three levels of experience (25+, 10, and 2 years). This paper will orient the study within the literature on collaboration in academic settings, specifically the dynamics of conflict in such situations and then discuss the collaborative experiences of the three participating teachers in light of this discussion. The data interpretation follows the theoretical framework based on Achinstein (2002) but from an *intrapersonal* perspective rather than an *interpersonal* perspective.

## Collaboration in Academic Settings—Conflict, Borders, and Ideology

Since the mid-1990s, Mexican higher education policies have been fostering collaboration and community building among faculty members for the design, implementation, and evaluation of educational programs as well as for research (Encinas, Busseniers, & Ramírez, 2005). However, it is a common belief among faculty members in this setting and in the wider professional context that reaching consensus in both transformation and research processes is very complex, multidimensional, and often generates disagreements (Dallmer, 2004; Witten, Castiñera, Brenes, Preciado, & Tapia, 2007).

A significant amount of research in Mexico focuses on macro transformation processes in higher education (e.g., Ibarra, 2002). A search of educational databases, however, uncovered no studies on micro collaboration processes in this national context. In school settings previous international research tends to present a simplified picture of the situation by underestimating the tensions among teachers and administrators during the consensus building processes (Barth, 1990; Hayes & Kelly, 2000; Sergiovanni, 1993) or present-

ing these tensions as aberrant behavior (Achinstein, 2002; Hartley, 1985; Yeomans, 1985).

Achinstein (2002), whose research focuses on individuals' and groups' use of power to implement change in schools, considers that under-evaluating the dilemmas and conflicts that naturally emerge could ill-prepare participants to be able to contribute to these educational processes. Furthermore, these processes may be blocked, retarded, hindered, or redesigned depending on how participants manage tensions and challenges. Thus, understanding the natural role of conflict (Achinstein, 2002; Fullan, 1993) in education communities and how faculty members, administrators, and students deal with it seems to be an essential component in the discussion on collaboration and community learning.

Achinstein (2002), drawing on micropolitical theory, found that *conflict*, *borders*, and *ideology* were at the center of issues related to collaboration and community learning and are underrepresented in research on teacher collaboration. She defines conflict as both a "situation and an ongoing process in which views and behavior diverge . . . or appear to be to some degree incompatible" (p. 425). As a result, attempts to foster collaborative communities in educational settings often result in conflict because collaborative practices challenge well-established norms of "privacy, independence, and professional autonomy" (Achinstein, 2002, p. 425).

Border politics in micropolitical theory refers to processes in which individuals see themselves as belonging to groups and not belonging to other groups. A potential source of conflict in teacher collaboration can come from teachers left out of the collaboration because they are not in the "group". At the same time that a collaborative community is defined, outsider status is also defined. Conflict between borders can strengthen communities through a common enemy mentality or, conversely,

strengthen communities through accepting and incorporating outsider perspectives to expand borders (Chomsky as cited in Achinstein, 2002).

The third element identified in Achinstein's (2002) study as underrepresented in teacher collaboration literature is that of ideology. Every teacher possesses her or his own ideology regarding learning and teaching processes, and these ideologies are the sources for how teachers "make sense of their work and ultimately take action" (Achinstein, 2002, p. 427). These ideologies can be synchronized with others in the community or can be at odds with others. Political borders within an educational setting may represent a variety of ideologies, some of which could be compatible and others not—a potential source of conflict.

However, instead of "pathologizing" conflict as much literature on collaboration does (Achinstein, 2002, p. 449), Achinstein's (2002) study of two middle schools in San Francisco in the United States revealed that conflict associated with collaborative efforts could be a source of innovation, of allowing new ideas to enter, and creative problem solving. But it has its costs. If the idea of conflict in communities is not acknowledged and used to an advantage, existing political borders can be strengthened and group ideologies within those borders can become more impenetrable, fracturing the community even more. Achinstein recommends that conflict become the focus of inquiry in collaboration and community building and be regarded as an opportunity for growth.

As mentioned above there is literature on conflict in collaborative settings. However, most of the literature is related to *interpersonal* conflicts (Achinstein, 2002; Barth, 1990; Hartley, 1985; Sergiovanni, 1993; Yeomans, 1985). What may be underrepresented in the current literature are studies on *intrapersonal* conflicts resulting from collaborative efforts. This paper attempts to fill this

gap, on a micro level, by looking at intrapersonal conflict as a result of teacher collaborative efforts.

Interpersonal conflicts of the nature of those described in this section were not an issue in this study. However, intrapersonal conflicts, defined as those conflicts within the individual related to the context of this study, are the focus and are examined using Achinstein's (2002) micropolitical theory framework. All three participant teachers experienced some level of intrapersonal conflict associated with this collaboration as described below.

### **Discussion of Collaboration in This Setting**

Three teachers participated in this study. Each teacher represented a different level of experience. At the time of the study Maria (pseudonyms are used for all three teachers) had over 25 years of teaching experience in ELT and teacher training. Olga had ten years in ELT and teacher training, and Angela had two years in ELT. All three teachers had masters' degrees. Maria and Olga had been working as research partners for at least six years prior to this study. This has relevance to this study because these two participants had already established the trust, confidence, respect, and friendship needed for successful collaborative efforts.

To understand the above issues, it is important to understand the context of this study. This is explained in the following section.

### **Course Description**

The project reported in this paper began in an informal manner in the spring of 2006. Maria and Olga had worked with the thesis seminars for several years and knew that there were serious problems in the FML with students and their research training and academic writing and reading, so they decided to submit a proposal to their faculty research group to investigate issues related to these courses. Angela

had not taught the thesis seminars before and asked for Maria's and Olga's support. So they invited her to use an online course management system which Olga had successfully integrated the previous year into her thesis seminar course to more formally investigate the efficacy of the course management system to improve thesis seminar outcomes.

The course was conducted in face-to-face sessions using an online course management program (Yahoo Groups). For the fall semester (Seminar I) classes were six hours a week. For the spring semester (Seminar II) classes were three hours a week. During the fall semester students generally worked on their introductions and literature reviews. This task involved deciding on a research topic, defining research questions or hypotheses, developing, to some extent, a proposed research methodology and reading related literature, and writing these thesis sections. The spring semester generally consisted of writing the methodology, results, and conclusions chapters. This involved also doing the actual instrument design, piloting, data collection and analysis, and presentation of results.

Face-to-face sessions varied according to each teacher's style and the students' needs. The online portion was designed by the three teachers and set up before the start of classes. This part of the course contained all the course administration papers such as the syllabus and course evaluation criteria. This online portion was set up so that it was also a course schedule. Each assignment had its own folder which indicated the due date. Each course folder contained another folder which had the assignment instructions, evaluation criteria, and a model assignment or writing outline. Also within the assignment folder each class had individual folders where students uploaded their assignments. Within each of those class folders each teacher had a "returned papers folder" which was the location for students to retrieve their

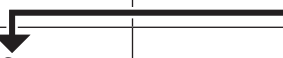
assignments with teacher feedback. All of these folders were accessible to every member of the group. The online site also had folders of sample writings and useful articles.

The research project associated with this course consisted of an evaluation of the course based on several data sources. The evaluation was carried out in May 2006 and again in May 2007. The data sources for the evaluations were: from the students—completed assignments, research projects generated by the course itself, completed theses drafts, overall satisfaction, class statistics (average attendance, dropouts and failures, average grades,

and so on)—from the teachers—teacher retrospective end of semester project reports (data source for this present paper), a number of resulting conference presentations and journal articles. The results of the first evaluation (May 2006) were used to make changes to the subsequent year and then the course was evaluated again which gave an indication of the success of the course as well as areas for improvement.

Table 1 presents the other elements in the larger project as well as the investigation of the teacher collaboration (reported in the last row of the table). These findings are reported in the following section.

**Table 1.** The Courses, the Evaluation and This Project

Date	Courses	Evaluation	This Project
May 2006		<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Students</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assignments</li> <li>• Research projects generated by the course</li> <li>• Completed theses drafts</li> <li>• Class statistics (average attendance, dropouts and failures, average grades, and so on)</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Teachers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher retrospective end of semester project reports</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Evaluation results</b></p>	
Fall 2006	Research Seminar I		3 teachers' collaboration processes
Spring 2007	Research Seminar II		3 teachers' collaboration processes
May 2007		<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Students</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assignments</li> <li>• Research projects generated by the course</li> <li>• Completed theses drafts</li> <li>• Class statistics (average attendance, dropouts and failures, average grades, and so on)</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Teachers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers' weekly meetings</li> <li>• Teacher retrospective end of semester project reports</li> </ul> <p><b>Evaluation results—for further research</b></p>	<p>The teachers' weekly meetings and the project reports are the data for the project reported in this article</p>

## Results

### Micropolitical Intrapersonal Aspects

Achinstein's (2002) study proposes that micropolitical theory can be used as a framework for understanding aspects of teacher collaboration. As discussed above she identifies three factors that influence collaborative efforts: conflict, political borders, and ideologies. However, those factors are discussed in her study as between people involved in collaboration. Those issues did not exist in this small scale study between the three teachers but rather within each of the teachers to varying degrees. This phenomenon is significant regarding the literature on teacher collaboration because it may be underrepresented and because it is an aspect that affects collaborative efforts as much as the interpersonal aspects noted in Achinstein.

The following sections present the three teachers' reflections on these three factors experienced on an intrapersonal level. The reflections come from weekly research sessions between Maria and Olga and from retrospective project reports done by all three participants for the 2006-2007 period of this project.

Achinstein's (2002) theoretical framework was used to analyze the data that emerged from the teachers' weekly meetings and final reports. Thus, the three issues she detected as central to collaboration and community learning—conflict, borders, and ideology—were the categories used for the analysis.

#### Intrapersonal Conflicts

The data, in this study, indicated that these three teachers reported intrapersonal conflicts rather than interpersonal ones. This was probably due to the characteristics of the three participants, their willingness to collaborate, and the context of this specific investigation.

For purposes of this study intrapersonal conflicts are defined as those conflicts which occur not between participants but within individual participants in response to factors related to the collaboration in this project. Most of these conflicts associated with this project are associated with feelings of inadequacy in the individual when comparing herself with one or both of the others. For example, these two lines one from Olga's fall 2006 project report and the other from Maria's fall 2006 project report illustrate the nature of this intrapersonal conflict related to inadequacy:

*Olga:* I should have worked more on literature reviews.

*Maria:* I should have worked more the methodology.

It is interesting that both independently found some weakness to report about their own work. The regret or inadequacy expressed in the statements was based on their comparing their performance with the other teacher's. Maria and Olga had often discussed this issue in their weekly research meetings. Maria felt that because Olga was at the time working on the methodology section of her pilot study related to her doctoral work, she had a stronger focus on methodology. This was probably an accurate assumption. Almost all of Olga's students had identified and designed their research methodologies and five of her 23 students had collected their data at the end of the fall semester. This is an action almost never accomplished in the fall semester which is usually dedicated, as mentioned above, to writing the thesis introductions and literature reviews.

However, as indicated in those two lines above, after talking to Maria and listening to how she worked with her students to help them understand the fine points of literature reviews, Olga realized at the end of the fall semester that she should have done more with her students related to writing the literature review. When comparing herself with Maria and Maria's class she had feelings of inadequacy in

what she did in this respect. As discussed in their weekly sessions Maria's class worked in groups and analyzed a variety of texts for structure, form, and content related to literature reviews. Many of their classes were dedicated to this task. In general Olga felt that the face-to-face element of Maria's class was much better delivered than hers was.

These feelings of insecurity transcend levels of experience. Maria writes that teachers with years of experience do feel insecurities:

Novice teachers often feel that there is a moment in which one stops feeling insecure about one's teaching, if they only knew that each new context brings new challenges and that feeling of insecurity. One of my colleagues is working on her PhD and I'm not so, there was a moment in which I felt I was in disadvantage. I started reading, talking to other colleagues especially about research methods. Moreover, I haven't attended research seminar courses in almost 10 years and although I try to read and attend conferences, I know how important it is to attend continuing education formal seminars on these issues. So, this realization has helped me understand how much I need to learn and organize my time in order to attend research seminars and workshops.

However, Angela's intrapersonal conflicts were principally associated with her perceived lack of experience. As mentioned before, fall 2006 was her first time teaching the research seminar as well as other courses, so she was aware of her lack of experience. She expresses it in her report:

My lack of experience was my main internal conflict because when your work is exposed online, everyone can notice it. In the beginning, there was a pressure to upload corrected papers and "feel" at the same time that someone was going to look at all your comments to your students. I put a lot of pressure on myself and I worried that I was giving the proper kind of feedback to my students. This isn't such a crucial element when your work isn't exposed to everyone else!

It is interesting that Angela expressed this idea of "exposure" in this extract. In discussing this idea,

all three teachers came to the conclusion that this kind of collaboration—where one feels exposed—is analogous in a number of aspects to being unclothed in front of your other team members.

We feel the following experience, while anecdotal, illustrates this situation. Besides her spring 2007 thesis Seminar II Maria also had a thesis seminar which was not part of this current project. Another colleague also had a spring thesis seminar but was experiencing problems related to the course. Maria told this teacher about the group site she was using for her course and gave this teacher access to it. Within just a few days the teacher told Maria that her students did not want to work that way and that she would not participate. However, Maria had given this teacher her own (Maria's) username and password, so this teacher could have unlimited access to Maria's group but without contributing anything to the group. Retrospectively Maria regretted giving this level of access to a teacher who declined to participate because Maria now felt exposed, naked, while the other teacher could move around the online site "clothed". She could see all of Maria's students' work, all the assignments, all the feedback, and so on but without exposing any of her own or her students' work.

We feel this incident illustrates the nature of this type of collaboration—and it seems supported by the study data. To be able to feel comfortable with this kind of exposure, team members have to have a combination of trust, confidence, and even a certain amount of friendship. But perhaps most importantly there has to be a feeling of reciprocity. Team members cannot feel that they are exposing themselves while another team member is not. Again the analogy of being naked before your colleagues seems particularly apt. Most people are not comfortable being naked in front of others unless it is a situation shared by all members.

### **Borders**

In micropolitical theory, borders are described as a defining mechanism for the placement of people and ideas (Achinstein, 2002). The idea is very similar to national borders or any other kind of structure that people and ideas can be put into and seen to differentiate from other people and ideas. Issues of insider and outsider status emerge as borders are defined.

In the case of this study, Maria and Olga, because they have been working together for so long, had well established political borders. As Maria described the relationship:

Olga and I have been working together for about 6 years and this certainly helps. We have been reflecting on how difficult it would have been to show all one's work to someone in our own faculty whom we didn't trust. As soon as something happens we just talk about it and we find a way to deal with it. Furthermore, Angela was very open and willing to cooperate. So I think we were really lucky.

According to Angela's comments below, it seemed as if there was a time that she might have been feeling like a sort of immigrant in Maria and Olga's country:

As the newest in the academic team, I always tried to show a disposition and a positive attitude toward the course. My main internal problem was to provide useful comments, interesting observations, and productive discussions to contribute and feel integrated into the team.

She had this feeling not only about her situation but felt her students could feel in a disadvantageous situation as well:

Another worry was to integrate my students with others from the experienced teachers without feeling in disadvantage. I tried to motivate and encourage them all the time, to forget the situation that they were working with the new "acquisition" [the new teacher].

Surprisingly Angela's students had indicated that they wanted to participate in the theses oral presentations which the other two groups were doing. However, because Angela experienced some problems and could not participate in the group for the first three months of the spring semester, she felt outside the border again:

Finally, my students wanted to be integrated in the virtual community when presenting their final version of their papers. I decided not to participate because we did not follow the same rhythm in the second course and I did not want to press my students, but they were missing that collective virtual team work.

### **Ideologies**

Teacher ideologies are probably the most influential aspect of collaboration issues. An ideology is a central frame that each person puts around her or his thoughts, opinions, and actions. What people do and think are based on the ideologies they hold (Jameson, Ferrell, Kelly, Walker, & Ryan, 2006). This is a particularly important concept in any study attempting to understand teacher collaboration. In the case of this study the three teachers' ideologies overlapped in some instances and diverged in others.

All three participants shared ideological perspectives in regard to the efficacy of using an online component. All three teachers had experience with online courses and knew the advantages of using this kind of technology. All three also believed that sharing work and experiences would be an incredible asset in their understanding and ultimate improvement of the thesis courses. All three trusted each other and believed in the project enough to make the collaboration possible.

The divergence in individual ideologies is probably most significant regarding aspects of face-to-face instruction. In Angela's case, because this



was her first time teaching this course, her teaching beliefs for this course were not well established:

Another conflict was the combination of different teaching methodologies for this seminar, which is not another subject; it's a methodological path to show your students. I wasn't sure if those chosen ways were the best to follow with the seminar.

Angela modified her ideological stance on face-to-face instruction in response to the online course design:

Before starting this group work, I had different curricula for the course; I had prepared the topics with power point presentations. When I joined to the work online, I had to adjust my materials and adopt the scheduled program.

This kind of openness and willingness to change or adapt (rather than rigidly adhering to personal ideologies) for the sake of the collaborative effort is an example of what acceptance of ideological differences can do for personal, group, and professional growth. If Angela had been unwilling to change her already carefully planned lessons, she might have missed the opportunity to work collaboratively with other teachers and the subsequent collegiality and exposure to new ideas and methods. If this had happened, Maria and Olga, likewise, would have missed working and learning from Angela.

Recognizing the power of ideological beliefs and making concessions for the sake of collaborative work do not mean abandoning personal creativity and control in the classroom. Angela, Maria, and Olga conducted their face-to-face portions of the course differently based on their own teaching beliefs. However, as mentioned above, all of them struggled with internal conflicts regarding how well they were conducting their classes when comparing themselves with the other. These internal conflicts, challenges of personal exposure, and modifications in personal ideologies may be one source of teachers' reluctance to participate collaboratively. It is

sometimes easier to continue on in ways that are comfortable and familiar however stagnating they may be, than to be faced with having to re-conceptualize existing beliefs and practices (Myers, 1993). Understanding intrapersonal conflicts, borders, and ideologies as threads that construct consensus and collaboration processes in teacher higher education contexts could enhance and deepen our perspectives on these processes.

### Conclusion

Findings of the collaborative component of this research project have been presented using the micropolitical perspective proposed by Achinstein (2002). Data from retrospective reports were analyzed based on the framework of intrapersonal conflict, borders, and ideology. Achinstein's study reported the effects of those factors on collaboration from an interpersonal perspective. The study reported in this paper looked at those factors from an intrapersonal perspective. The value in recognizing that participants in collaborative situations or efforts experience intrapersonal conflicts as described in this paper might lead to an explanation or understanding of interpersonal issues that arise from collaborative efforts. In other words, it might be that unresolved or unrecognized intrapersonal conflict leads to interpersonal conflict of the type that does not enrich collaborative efforts. However, understanding and expecting these reactions can possibly contribute to making teacher collaboration of the type reported here more successful.

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