



Interaction in teacher communities: Three forms teachers use to express contrasting ideas in video clubs



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Contrasting ideas can benefit teacher communities, but expression is variable.
- Video club participants used three forms to express contrasting ideas.
- Forms are distinguished by the presence/absence of three interactional criteria.
- Expression via open discussion might result in the greatest benefits for teachers.
- Groups using serial turns or implicit critique can move toward open discussion.

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ABSTRACT

Interaction and the expression of contrasting ideas are thought to be important components of teacher learning communities. However, criteria for identifying beneficial interactional practices are needed. In this paper we use the tools of conversation analysis to examine mathematics teachers' expressions of contrasting ideas in a video club setting. Using turn-by-turn analyses of talk, we describe criteria for distinguishing three forms for expressing contrasting ideas – open discussion, implicit critique, and serial turns. We consider potential implications of each form for teacher learning and conclude with suggestions to help teacher communities move between the three forms.

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In the past three decades, a growing body of international research has focused on the importance of teacher learning communities (Hadar & Brody, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). When such communities are working well, participation and discourse practices enhance teacher learning by supporting professional critique, reflection, and collaboration (Borko, 2004; Little, 2002; Van Es, 2012). However, many schools and teacher educators struggle to foster such constructive interactions (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Van Es, 2012). In light of this challenge, it may be useful to conceptualize interaction as its own learning domain, establishing learning goals and identifying “prior knowledge” or interactional skills that groups of teachers already possess (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). However, to specify the interactional norms we

hope teachers will develop, we must first identify characteristics of constructive interactional practices and distinguish them from less productive approaches. Likewise, to understand communities' existing interactional resources, we must examine elements of communication patterns that diverge from “best practices” of interaction and that may be useful in developing more ideal approaches.

In this study we take a step toward this goal by examining teachers' micro-level interactions in the setting of teacher video clubs, which are apt for exploring such questions because their discussion-based format foregrounds interaction. We use tools from conversation analysis to examine a practice that is particularly important for developing strong teacher communities: the expression of “contrasting ideas,” or comments that are different and, to some degree, in opposition. While expressing contrasting ideas is sometimes associated with conflict and argument, our usage is not intended to imply either and should not be interpreted as having a negative connotation.

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Through the close analysis of talk, gaze, and gesture, we identify three ways of expressing contrasting ideas, which we term *open discussion*, *implicit critique*, and *serial turns*. Each form is characterized by a distinctive combination of three key interactional features: response to a prior speaker's idea, expression of a contrasting idea, and *preferred* turn shape.¹ We illustrate each form with transcript excerpts from a representative segment of a video club. We close by considering the resources for teacher learning that each form may provide and suggesting ways that facilitators can help groups move between forms.

1. Teacher communities

Internationally, considerable attention has been paid to identifying the forms and features of professional development that are most likely to lead to enhanced instruction and student learning (Avalos, 2011; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Stes, Min-Leliveld, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2010; Taylor & Rege Colet, 2010). Strengthening teacher communities is a particularly important aspect of effective professional development (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999; Hadar & Brody, 2010; Skerrett, 2010; Van Es, 2012), as cultivating community is thought to encourage teacher learning and growth (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Grossman et al., 2001; Little, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Snow-Gerono, 2005) and potentially improve student outcomes (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu, 2010; Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011). However, such claims raise the question of what we mean by "community."

Grossman et al. (2001) cautioned that the word "community" loses its meaning when applied indiscriminately to any group of teachers in a room together. Researchers working to clarify what constitutes a teacher community have employed terms such as "inquiry community," "teacher professional community," and "professional learning community" to foreground different aspects of community (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Levine, 2010; Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). However, there exists a common thread of teachers collaborating and reflecting on their teaching with the goal of learning. Some researchers agree that the ultimate goal is the creation of a "learning community," or a group of teachers engaging in *successful* collaboration, reflection, and teacher development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Little, 2002; Skerrett, 2010; Van Es, 2012). In this work we do not limit our investigation to communities that are already functioning effectively. Rather, we examine groups of teachers engaging in a shared enterprise with the goal of learning, perhaps with varying levels of success—what many would refer to as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Using this broader criterion for inclusion allows us to explore the similarities and differences between communities engaging in productive interactions and communities still working to develop effective interactional practices.

2. Role of communication

There is international agreement that communication is key in the development of strong teacher communities and enhancement of teacher and student learning. For example, in the professional development community Hadar and Brody (2010) created at a teacher training college in Israel, engaging in discourse about student learning was critical in creating opportunities for teacher development and encouraging teachers to enact new teaching

methods in the classroom. Similarly, Wood's (2007) comparison of two teacher learning communities in the United States highlights the importance of teachers using dialogue to question their practices and reflect on lessons learned in building crucial knowledge for teaching. Dobber, Akkerman, Verloop, Admiraal, and Vermunt (2012) found that teacher educators, experts on communities, and student teachers in the Netherlands all deemed a shared interactional repertoire especially important for promoting collaboration. Finally, Van Es (2012) observed that teachers' successful and productive analysis of student thinking may be contingent on the establishment of shared participation and discourse norms including providing critical feedback, encouraging reflection, and supporting the expression of different perspectives, or contrasting ideas.

This final practice, the expression of contrasting ideas, is the focus of the current study and has been addressed by a variety of researchers, albeit using different terminology. For example, Day's (1993) work in the UK calls for both support and challenge from colleagues, including "confrontation either by self or others" (p. 88) to optimize professional development and enhance teacher learning. Lima's (2001) work in Portugal emphasizes enacting change in schools through the development of "cognitive conflict" (p. 111). In the United States, one of Little's (1993) key principles of professional development is that it "offers support for informed dissent" (p. 138), while Lord (1994) writes about critical collegiality, a relation among teachers that involves "bring[ing] to the surface [their] questions and concerns [and] learn[ing] from constructive criticism" (p. 184). These themes of challenging colleagues, offering critical feedback, and expressing multiple perspectives surface in many additional studies of teacher communities (e.g. Borko, 2004; Craig, 2012; Piazza et al., 2009; Snow-Gerono, 2005).

2.1. Benefits of expressing contrasting ideas

A variety of benefits have been described for groups that discuss contrasting ideas. First, such interactions can strengthen community ties. Achinstein (2002) found that reflecting on ideas, engaging in critical discussion, and addressing conflict and dissent head-on were crucial components of creating or reinvigorating a teacher learning community. Similarly, though Grossman et al.'s (2001) teachers initially avoided discussing diverse perspectives, teacher-led discussions acknowledging individual differences and considering multiple points of view enhanced group understanding and helped group members see themselves as a "we." Additionally, Van Es (2012) found that developing participation and discourse norms centered on critical and reflective discussion was a key component of building a learning community in which teachers both supported and challenged each other.

Second, De Dreu (1997) suggests that conflict can enhance creativity and help individuals value independent thinking. De Dreu and De Vries (1997) found similar benefits for discussing divergent perspectives, including greater originality and creativity among individuals. In the educational setting, this is linked to enhanced teacher learning: Engaging in critical discussion encourages teachers to consider alternate perspectives, reflect on their own attitudes and teaching practices, and potentially make changes to those beliefs and practices (Achinstein, 2002; Grossman et al., 2001).

Third, at the organizational level, expressing contrasting ideas has the potential to improve cooperation and group decision-making, as suppressing conflict can reduce the quality of organizational decisions (De Dreu, 1997). In schools, openness toward conflict, questioning, and change encourages groups to engage with major philosophical and organizational issues that need to be

¹ Note that 'preferred' is used in a technical sense, explained in greater depth in Section 3.2.

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