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Collaboration In Action: The impact of a cooperative learning environment on student engagement in ninth grade English

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Teaching and Learning (Curriculum Design)

by

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2011
The Thesis of Jessica Jean Young is approved and is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego
2011
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated in loving memory of Jolene Combs, teacher, journalism educator, mentor and, most importantly, friend.

Jolene’s work in the field of scholastic journalism demonstrated the power of good teaching and advising. Even though she is gone, her impact will be felt for years to come through the important lessons she instilled in those under her tutelage. She will be missed but never forgotten.
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Collaboration In Action: The impact of a cooperative learning environment on student engagement in ninth grade English

by

Jessica Jean Young

Master of Arts in Teaching and Learning (Curriculum Design)

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Claire Ramsey, Chair

Collaboration in Action was designed to facilitate a learning environment that would increase motivation and engagement among students in ninth grade English classroom. The model that was used was based on the structure used in scholastic journalism, which required the participating students to be teachers, learners and collaborators.

The curriculum was implemented in a ninth grade English classroom at a Title I high school. Prior to the implementation, the class average was in the D+ range.

Collaboration in Action was used alongside a novel study. The students were grouped based on skills and social interactions and expected to work together to complete tasks. The students were reliant on one another to complete tasks and turn in
assignments, in order for their groups to succeed. It was critical for the students to monitor and manage one another’s progress.

Through this curriculum, it was found that by placing students in structured, collaborative learning environments, they were more likely to be engaged in their material, than when in a traditional classroom environment. Creating a structure in which students had to rely on one another made each student feel personally responsible for the success of his/her peers. Collaboration in Action facilitated a sense of belonging, ownership and community for students that helped them feel supported.

Through Collaboration in Action, teachers can borrow from the successful practices of the journalism classroom. Despite the unique nature of scholastic journalism, the structures that are used in electives can garner meaningful results in the core subject areas as well.
I. INTRODUCTION

Every student can reflect on his or her academic career and pick out a teacher, or a class, that made going to school each day worth it. For some, it’s a math teacher with a knack for numbers. For others, it’s an English teacher who always knew the perfect book to recommend. And still, for others, it’s an elective course that helped students find their niche, their passion and their drive. Helping students discover new information, expand their skills and challenging them to try something new are many of the rewarding charges that teachers assume each year. Knowing how to push students to accomplish more, celebrate their successes and assist them in embracing and overcoming obstacles become skills in every teacher’s arsenal, tools to help students get the most out of their educational experience.

As teachers, we want to create, facilitate and maintain environments where students feel safe, supported, important and valuable. Knowing that our classrooms are somewhere that many students call “home” is one of the many rewards that teaching can bring. Building a community within the confines of a traditional classroom setting can be challenging, but the benefits of such an environment can have a powerful impact on the students involved.

Some courses, like many electives offered at the high school level, naturally lend themselves to a classroom-as-a-community design. Within these intricate and unique communities, students assume roles and responsibilities that help them navigate the world in which their classrooms exist. Unlike the traditional classroom setting, classrooms that model themselves as miniature communities provide students
with support, a sense of belonging and the safety they need to learn effectively. The environment that students work within varies from class to class, but certain types of structures create extensive opportunities for student learning and development. Students who become involved in collaborative learning environments, where they must rely on their peers for success, are introduced to new learning and teaching styles that vary drastically from a typical teacher-centered classroom. While these types of courses are drastically different from core subject area courses, the structural and collaborative lessons that can be derived from them can guide educators towards creating successful, collaborative and supportive communities in any classroom.

Product-driven classrooms, such as publications courses and or student leadership organizations, are different than core subject areas. In these courses, many students can repeat the class, year after year, and build upon their experiences while teaching their newer, less experienced, peers. The relationships that naturally develop in these sorts of situations can be adapted and applied outside the context of elective courses; collaborative learning environments can work in any content area.

Encouraging students to engage in active learning, providing them with authentic experiences and structuring a meaningful community of practice within a classroom all promise limitless benefits for student learning. The creation and implementation of a model that facilities a community of practice in a classroom setting would be beneficial for teachers of not only elective courses, but in various content areas.
A successful, established high school journalism classroom acted as the impetus for this project. Observing the students’ relationships, interactions and collaboration strategies lead to the creation of a collaborative curriculum structure that could be used in a variety of classroom settings. The design model that was fueled by the powerful environment in the scholastic journalism classroom was then implemented in a ninth grade English classroom—a world far-removed from the self-motivated and high achieving students that comprised the journalism staff.

Many would argue that such a model couldn’t work in a traditional classroom. There are many factors about journalism, and other electives, that can’t be replicated in a core subject area, but that does not mean that successful collaborative environments cannot be created. Students in any classroom setting are capable of finding and achieving comfort, working with their peers and establishing strong, supportive relationships with their classmates.
II. ASSESSMENT OF NEED

For many students, high school presents a range of challenges. As students move through formal schooling, they are constantly confronted with new environments, new peers, new concepts and new ideas. In order to be academically successful, students must learn to adapt their knowledge based on new information. These new learning experiences can create somewhat unsettling experiences for students, who are challenged by material that is unfamiliar to them or that contradicts what they feel they already know. New environments, new peers and new teachers are a few of the many challenges students face as they enter high school. As this section will discuss, it is important to establish a sense of belonging for students, so that they feel connected and important in the school context. Additionally, looking at factors that influence motivation and engagement will provide a framework for potential solutions to many of the challenges students face at school.

Community

McMillian and Chavis (1986) suggest that there are four integral components that define an effective community. Individuals participating in a community must have a sense of membership—they need to feel like they belong to the environment around them. In the classroom, this means that students need to believe that they are on common ground with their peers. The second component that McMillian and Chavis highlight is influence. In the classroom, students need to feel like they are impacting the world around them. They want to know that the work they are doing is valued and it matters to their peers and their teacher. Students need to feel valued, both
personally and academically, and have the sense that their contributions to the class are important. Next, McMillian and Chavis look to the integration and fulfillment of needs. Students come to school to learn, and they will often be challenged by the ideas and lessons they are presented with. In a successful community, students know that they will have adequate support, scaffolding and structure that helps them meet their needs for knowledge. Resources, in both the teacher, lessons and among their peers, will be readily available to students and they will know how to navigate and access them. These sense of support eliminates the fear of not knowing and instead creates value in the act of learning and discovery. The final component of community that McMillian and Chavis focus on is a shared emotional connection. Members of a community feel connected to one another, based on a variety of factors, ranging from geographical similarities to shared goals. Regardless of what the shared connections are, students thrive off of this sense of familiarity among the unfamiliar. When attempting to conquer new content, an effective community will rely on the shared experiences, goals, ideas and values of its members to provide the support necessary to succeed.

When the four faucets of community work together effectively, classrooms can become environments that are equipped for student success. McMillian and Chavis (1986) explicitly define the sense of community as, “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (4).
Facilitating and maintaining a sense of community in the classroom is key for student success.

Students who do not connect, engage or become involved in their classrooms are increasingly at risk for struggling through or dropping out of high school. Caraway et al. (2003) suggest that students who are disengaged from school are at risk for serious consequences, ranging from dropping out, to substance abuse to criminal activity. Without the communal connections within the classroom, students often look to other outlets—often dangerous and troublesome ones—to find a place to belong.

Many school related factors dictate the level of success a student may achieve in his or her high school career. Caraway et al (2003) identified a student’s relationship with his or her teachers, peer relationships and connections, as well as personal investments in the campus and classroom communities as indicators of success for students. While there are many factors outside the classroom that can have a significant impact on a student’s ability to be successful in high school, the efforts that teachers make to provide relevant, engaging and meaningful activities and curriculum can provide the connection to school that many borderline students need (Caraway et al., 2003).

Creating and facilitating environments in which students feel welcome, at ease, capable and appreciated is key in fostering educational engagement. Rumberger (2009) points out that student/teacher ratios, teacher quality and academic rigor also influence a students’ ability to connect with school. As economic situations become more and more difficult, class sizes are increasing and teachers are being stretched...
thinner and thinner. Teachers need to be supported and encouraged in their efforts to provide learning experiences that make students want to be in the classroom. Without necessary support, teachers are unable to devote their efforts towards facilitating effective environments for students. Teachers need to be empowered to develop the kinds of communities within their classrooms that students want to take part in.

Juvonen and Wentzel (1996) also made a connection between the social elements in the classroom and academic success. Their 1996 study found that as students advanced through their schooling, they felt that there was increased emphasis on comparisons among their peers. Students who had a history of lower academic performance were considered inferior by their peers and often viewed themselves as inferior as well. Students in the Juvonen and Wentzel (1996) study reported that they often “felt stupid” and that similar feelings of inadequacy lead them to disregard their studies. A lacking community doesn’t provide for the needs, nor does it protect the feelings of its students. Classrooms that function effectively as communities demonstrate acceptance of all skill levels and provide scaffolding for members whose skills may be lacking.

Students in these types of environments support, not belittle, one another. The alienation of students leads to lower achievement levels on that part of the lesser-achieving students. Higher achieving students tend to disassociate with those students they feel to be less skilled and students who struggle often band together, frequently creating obstacles to classroom management for the teacher and obstacles to learning for other students. Alienated students often disengage from the classroom,
damaging the community and academic achievement within the classroom (Jonkmann et al., 2009).

Environments that do not tolerate alienation and encourage students to support and engage with one another serve the needs of students effectively. Students who perceive their teacher as supportive and their classmates as respectful are less likely to feel anxious or nervous about participating in the classroom (Ryan and Patrick, 2001). Students who were encouraged by their teachers to share their ideas and discuss their thoughts with their peers experienced increased motivation and engagement in classroom activities. Environments that encourage interaction facilitate a sense of safety and community that allow students to participate in ways they may not, otherwise (Jonkmann, 2009). When students are comfortable, supported, welcomed and appreciated they are less inhibited in the classroom.

Over the past two decades, researchers and educators have advocated for the establishment of supportive and inclusive environments for students. Through these types of environments, schools are able to increase students’ feelings of belonging and efficacy, thus resulting in increases in student engagement and achievement (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Voelkl, 1996). Studies have indicated that schools have the power to provide students with supportive social environments while simultaneously developing academic knowledge and understanding (Midgley, Anderman and Hicks, 1995; Roeser, Midgley and Urdan, 1996). But, by focusing solely on individual ability and deemphasizing the importance
of relationships between students, schools have limited the positive role that they can play in the lives of their students (Eccles et al., 1993).

Narrowly focused, testing-based environments that have become common in the No Child Left Behind educational realm are damaging to students’ abilities to connect with school. As a result, students demonstrate declines in academic motivation and engagement and their abilities to work successfully with and among their peers plummet as they advance through school (Walker and Green, 2009). While schools are focusing on getting students ready for a litany of tests, students are losing interest and lacking social support.

A clear consequence of increased emphasis on testing is that students no longer see school as a safe, welcoming environment. Academics and social support are not mutually exclusive. Schools need to be cognizant of the social needs of students, and structure classrooms and curriculum in a way that provides that necessary support. As Hargreaves, Earl and Ryan (1996) state, “one of the most fundamental reforms needed in secondary and high school education is to make schools into better communities of caring and support for young people” (p. 77).

The need for a sense of support and belonging is paramount in high school aged students. Midgley et al. (1989), suggested that the need to connect with others in mutually supportive relationships and environments is at its peak in middle and high school aged students. What it means to belong may vary from student to student, but researchers have defined the term within the context of school to mean that students
feel as though they are an important part, a necessary part, of the school environment (Voelkl, 1996; Finn, 1989; Goodenow, 1993).

Finn (1989) found that when students did not identify a feeling of belonging, they were more likely to have higher rates of truancy, exhibit disruptive behaviors and be at a higher risk for dropping out. Further studies found that if a lack of belonging persists, students also tend to display an on-going lack of persistence, commitment and engagement in activities both in and outside of school (Trusty and Dooley-Dickey, 1993). Trusty and Dooley-Dickey (1993) also found that “when students reported a sense of alienation toward school, their grades in reading and mathematics were also negatively impacted” (p. 3). Additionally, students who struggle in these core content areas are also increasingly likely to have difficulties in other subject areas, leading to overall frustration and disengagement from school all together. Research suggests that when an environment is perceived as uninviting or non-supportive, students are likely to distance themselves from that environment. Conversely, when an environment appears to be welcoming, supportive and accepting, students are more likely to engage (Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps and Lewis, 2000).

The need to belong and the necessity for a safe supportive environment are directly related. When students feel connected to their classroom communities and are supported within them, they are more likely to positively engage and have higher levels of achievement. Academics and social support do not occur in isolation; rather, learning is a complex process that must consider both the role of personal interactions among students, as well as academic content.
Osterman (2000) made the argument that, “students who experience acceptance are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school” than students who feel challenged or threatened by their environments and/or peers (p. 359). Osterman suggests that focusing on the role of the teacher is one way to achieve the acceptance that students crave. By looking at how the teacher interacts with students, examining how the teacher facilitates community and maintains the classroom environment, many conclusions can be drawn.

Walker and Greene (2009) found that classroom belonging is not a “fixed property that is immune to appropriate and targeted intervention” (p. 8). The role of the teacher in the classroom as a supportive component is a major factor in a student’s sense of belonging. As such, the supportive element in every classroom falls directly into the hands, and control of, the classroom teacher. Teachers have the power to alter their students’ sense of belonging and community, which can be utilized to effect positive change in student levels of motivation, engagement and achievement (Walker and Greene, 2009).

Additionally, teachers can structure the physical environment of their classrooms to encourage students to engage with one another. When students participate alongside their peers, their ability to contribute to their environment is increased. And while many classrooms are structured so that students sit in groups, most work does not occur in groups larger than pairs. Effective group work needs to be structured, modeled and monitored by the teacher. Collaboration among students does not happen spontaneously—direct teacher intervention is necessary to facilitate
this type of learning (Hastings and Chantrey-Wood, 2002). Working alongside one’s peers helps to build a sense of need, belonging and support in the classroom, thus funneling into an effective community structure.

**Collaboration**

Mattessich and Monsey (1992) define collaboration as a, ‘“mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship… that includes a commitment to goals, a developed structure, shared responsibility, mutual accountability and responsibility and sharing of resources and rewards’” (5). Structuring curriculum to provide these necessities welcomes collaboration into the classroom. If teachers can apply the principles of collaboration to their structured activities, then students can reap the benefits of a collaborative learning environment.

Teachers have the ability to frame the content of their curriculum in ways that students find personally relevant to their future. Walker and Green (2009) found that teachers’ articulating how and why the learning tasks are important aided students’ ability to personally connect with content. Understanding the meaningfulness of content has a direct connection with students’ willingness to engage with the material. Other research (Greene et al., 2004 and Miller et al., 1999) also demonstrates that when students find materials relevant and meaningful to their future, they are more likely to experience an increase in engagement. As students navigate through curriculum that they deem to be important, they are more proactive producers of academic work and are more likely to contribute to the academic environment around them.
When students feel a sense of community and recognize their academic work as relevant and connected to their lives and future they are more likely to demonstrate high levels of engagement and achievement (Walker and Greene, 2009). Facilitating environments where these needs can be met should be a concern for educators across content areas.

In any classroom, there will be a wide range of skills among students. While some students will be capable of completing most tasks on their own, others will seem to struggle with even basic assignments. Grouping students of varying skill levels together helps to both facilitate a sense of belonging and a sense of support for the students involved. Students are more capable when they are paired with other students who can act as resources for them in the learning process. Additionally, teachers play an important role, as a more capable mentor, who can provide examples, structure and modeling for students to follow. Scaffolding helps provide a framework for students to follow as they begin to embark on the attainment of new knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978).

Unfortunately, the demands of education today don’t always allow for adequate modeling or collaboration in the classroom. Strict pacing guides, adherence to testing schedules and overburdened curriculum has many teachers taking the most direct route to completing units of study, which rarely provides adequate learning experiences. When students aren’t given adequate time to practice new skills and exercise new ideas, as well as engage with their peers, they don’t have the opportunity to obtain the level of competency that is necessary for them to feel confident in their skills. This leads to what Oakes and Lipton (2003) describe as “learned
helplessness”—essentially students decide not to demonstrate any effort because they do not feel they have the skills to be successful, even though they are competent.

Vygotsky also emphasized the role of the teacher in learning. Arranging activities and creating groupings are important tasks that educators are faced with and when done correctly, students are effectively challenged but not defeated. When classrooms are organized and a teacher mediates the learning process, learning is being structured and facilitated (Vygotsky, 1978). The extent of the success of that learning hinges on both the structure of the classroom and the approach to materials. Properly supporting both of these efforts through scaffolding, peer mediation, effective grouping and social interaction are among the strategies that teachers can use. As Oakes and Lipton (2003) suggest, children learn as they participate and teachers have the power to dictate how that participation occurs.

Engagement

Oakes and Lipton (2003) describe the discomfort that often comes with learning new concepts as, “energy, tension, sense of balance and imbalance, and even the motivation that drives the whole cognitive process” (71). This imbalance pushes students to seek out knowledge and motivates them to learn. The need, or desire to learn and gain knowledge helps students become engaged in their educational pursuits.

Marks (2000) argued that engagement implies both affective and behavioral participation in learning.
Finn (1989, 1993) define engagement as, "involvement with school; students’ psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote."

Steinberg (1996) also included students' "interest" and "emotional involvement" with school, including their "motivation to learn" in his definition of engagement. Engagement is an important facet of students' school experience because of its connection with achievement and motivation.

Marks (2000) found that secondary schools have the greatest challenges with engagement; disengagement afflicts as much as 60% of high school students. Girls were found to be more engaged in academic activities than boys and students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were also more consistently connected and interested in school activities. Marks (2000) cited a direct connection between engagement and school success. Higher achieving students reported higher levels of engagement in Lee and Smith’s 1993 research.

Newmann et al. (1992) suggest that there are three bases for combating student disengagement. First, students need to be able to build, develop and demonstrate their competence. In school, students need an environment that allows them to explore new concepts, while provided the necessary support to help them when they struggle (Newmann, 1992). They also need to be given opportunities to display what they know and have learned. Additionally, the students need to have a sense of membership in their environment. More engaged students report feeling that they are an important part of the school and classroom communities (Newmann, 1992). Finally, teachers
need to provide students with authentic academic work. Creating activities that relate to students’ backgrounds, challenge their ideas and provide them lessons they find relevant to their own success is key in increasing engagement among students (Newmann, 1992).

Even when Newmann’s three bases are met students still need support and intervention from the teacher. Students cannot be left unattended in the learning process. The unsettling feelings of not knowing, being unsure or daunted by new information are important factors in the learning process. But students cannot be left floundering in these feelings, without guidance. Providing proper scaffolding and support will help students to associate the uncomfortable feeling of not knowing with the need or desire to know. Oakes and Lipton argued that this identification is both productive and necessary in learning. It is, essentially, a driving factor in motivation (2003).

The sense of imbalance that children feel from a state of disequilibrium pushes them to make sense or order of the world around them. Oakes and Lipton (2003) suggest that when teachers can provide lessons that create this productive tension, “children will work hard even without consistent reinforcement” (87). This sense of motivation guides students towards a engagement. When engagement is cultivated in a collaborative environment, and supported by a community of learners, and bolstered through authentic learning activities, benefits for students abound.

Additionally, when students participate in learning that they identify as real and they feel that they are contributing something valuable, they become engaged and
connected to the endeavors of their group. Cultural theorists Lave and Wenger add that when students are a part of a learning community, their learning becomes legitimate. They begin to view what they are doing as important and they feel that their contributions, however small, are an important part of the group’s end goal. In this type of environment, students become motivated to learn so that they can be contributing members of their community (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

But many students who struggle academically appear to lack this socially-motivated desire to learn. They don’t crave knowledge for the sake of learning something new, but appear to do everything in their power to disconnect from all things academic. A number of factors can contribute to a student’s lack of academic success. For some students, they are unable to navigate the uncomfortable balance of what they understand and what they do not. For others, they feel isolated or alienated by their peers and school community.

Finn (1989) drew a connection between engagement and school success. Disengagement often sparks a downward spiral towards dysfunctional school behavior and, in many cases, students leaving school all together. Finn (1989) suggests that students do not engage in the academic pursuits when they do not fit in, do not feel pressured to participate and are not supported to succeed.

Conclusion
Teachers wield a great deal of power and influence in their classrooms. Not only do they act as role models, guides and sources of knowledge, but they are also
capable of creating and facilitating an environment that is structured for student success.

Designing classrooms and curriculum that center around motivating students, building a sense of community and infusing collaboration into daily activities provides opportunities to impact student engagement. Environments that made students feel welcomed, important, safe and significant help cultivate facilitate engagement. When students consider their contributions valuable, understand that they are supported and are comfortable accessing their resources they are more capable of success.

Curriculum and learning environments should be structured and delivered in such a way that student success is imminent. Steps can be taken towards that goal by infusing daily practices with collaboration, facilitating and maintaining a sense of community and providing authentic materials that students can connect to.
III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to address the shortcomings in many of today’s classrooms, structures need to be implemented that provide for the needs of students. Implementing a collaborative learning structure that provides a positive sense of community will create the kind of environment that research suggests increases levels of motivation and engagement in high school students. Educators need to take the necessary steps to implement collaborative learning environments in core subject areas, providing student support through a sense of community in the classroom.

Students have the power to be active participants in their own learning—they are not simply sponges that absorb the lessons presented to them. They are agents of their own learning, in which they make sense, create understanding and build knowledge from their experiences (Oakes and Lipton, 2003). By providing students with materials that they are both challenged by and interested in, teachers can provide materials and instruction that both motivates students and engages them in the learning process. Teachers can effectively tap into students’ intrinsic motivation and guide their desire to make sense of the world around them by providing authentic materials, supporting student learning and scaffolding activities for student success (Oakes and Lipton, 2003).

Engagement

Bayer (1990), Bruner (1987) and Marks (2000) argue that if students are presented with adequately challenging materials, they will have a natural curiosity that guides them towards learning. When this curiosity is tended to and supported, students
are more likely to become increasingly engaged in the materials. This possibility for motivation to learn and engagement in materials increases when socialization is introduced (Bayer, 1990). Individuals work together to help one another construct meaning and understanding and learning is navigated through interaction with others (Bruner, 1987).

When students become engaged, their learning becomes active. Active learning functions on the premise that students are doing more than just listening. Students are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge. Rather, they are actively consuming the environment around them, being impacted by all that takes places within their worlds (Oakes and Lipton, 2006). As they learn, students must not only take in information, but also read, write think, discuss and engage themselves in the learning process. In order to fully take advantage of an active learning environment, students must become engulfed in higher-order thinking, deep analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Bonwell and Elson, 1991).

Several strategies can be employed to promote engaging learning in the classroom. Creating discussion, providing time for reflection, interactive lesson planning, peer teaching and cooperative learning are all approaches that can be employed in schools to promote active learning. In order for students to reap the benefits of an active learning environment, teachers have to create an environment where students feel comfortable taking risks. Discussions, group work, reflection and peer teacher all require students to step outside of their comfort zones, and in order to do this effectively, learners need to feel safe. Teachers have to create supportive
intellectual and emotional learning spaces that encourage, promote and honor student risk-taking (Bonwell and Elson, 1991). Additionally, providing materials that students regard as relevant and connected to their lives creates a natural connection to classroom activities. Bayer (1990) suggests that, “the more meaningful a task is to the student, the more motivated the student will be,” (20).

The creation and maintenance of effective environments allow for students to expand their knowledge as well as their comfort zones. This idea of learning through social interaction is further qualified by Vygotsky. Learning, according to Vygotsky, could not happen without social engagement. The necessity for interaction explains why some environments are much better for learning than others. Based on this idea, Vygotsky developed the zone of proximal development (see Figure 1). Vygotsky’s ZPD harbors the knowledge that a student can learn when assisted by a more knowledgeable adult or peer. The zone is bordered by knowledge a learner already has and learning experiences that the learner is not yet capable of mastering on his or her own. By interacting with peers and teachers, students can expand their ZPDs to encompass new ideas and concepts that they would not have been able to attempt on their own. Vygotsky ultimately argued that learning is indistinguishable from interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978).

Without collaboration and interaction, students are limited by their own ZPDs. Classrooms that are structured to provide these opportunities become rich learning communities, where student motivation and engagement can develop (Oakes and Lipton, 2003).
It is within this zone that learners find comfort and safety that allows them to work with others while building upon their current knowledge and collaborating with those around them. Vygotsky proposed that the ZPD represents the knowledge that students can gain when working with a more capable peer or skilled adult. This zone is represented by limits on each side. On one side, students are faced with knowledge that they already have and tasks that he or she can achieve on his or her own. The other side of the zone represents the tasks that students can achieve with assistance and guidance (Vygotsky, 1978).

Applying the idea of the ZPD to an active learning environment demonstrates the power that effective peer collaboration can provide. Bolstering student ZPDs, facilitating discussion and encouraging higher-level thinking are all strategies that will
provide for successful active learning. The potential gains for students involved in active learning classrooms include higher levels of confidence, stronger communication skills, critical thinking skills, stronger peer-to-peer relationships and strong cooperative learning skills (Gaffney and Varma-Nelson, 2008). These factors all contribute to an increase in motivation and engagement levels (Bayer, 1990).

By providing learning opportunities that are multidimensional, students can function within their comfort zones, while having the support of their peers and structured classroom activities to compensate for their potential knowledge shortcomings. Teachers who can develop complex, realistic, challenging and varied assignments are capable of providing an environment where students can uncover, develop and combine their strengths in areas where they are lacking. Structuring a curriculum that facilities group work, social interaction and cooperative assignments opens the door for students to flex their multiple intelligences and help one another learn (Oakes and Lipton, 2003).

Heterogeneous grouping creates the ideal environment for students to exercise their skills. More capable students can assist struggling students and each group member can act as a resource to his or her peers. Having a sense of community, or contribution to a team environment, is also a motivating factor for students. When students feel that the work they are doing is authentic, that their work is real and their contributions are valuable, they become invested in the group’s work. Students, then, become active participants in the community of learning, contributing to the tasks at hand and becoming authentically engaged in the activities (Lave and Wenger, 1991).
It’s not clear how this section reviews literature on engagement and on motivation. You have not cited major work on motivation. You have not explained how motivation and engagement are related. I don’t think of engagement as one of Vygotsky’s important constructs. You need to define engagement and review engagement literature before you can try to locate it within the ZPD. What you have here is useful information but it needs to be preceded with grounding in motivation and engagement literature.

You depend upon Oakes and Lipton 2003 quite a bit. Extend your sources beyond their book to actual reported research in articles found in reviewed journals, which you learned to do Fall quarter. What studies do O and L cite? How do they use them to build their argument? Find O & L’s sources – you need to citing at that level.

**Community**

McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment together” (p. 9). These feelings of support and belonging are integral in building a strong community in the classroom.

The collaborative approach encourages teachers to view the classroom as a community of learners. As with any community, it needs to be tended to, cared for and aided to develop effectively (Bayer, 1990). When a sense of community is established, students feel free to find a comfortable niche. They can take part in whole-class
discussion, lead small groups, write reflectively, work independently or collaborate with peers without feeling like they are taking too large of a risk (Bayer, 1990).

Byrk and Driscoll (1988) argued that resources, technology, programs and facilities do not define a “good school”. Rather, the relationships that students have with one another and with their teachers contributes to successful environments in high schools. This sort of positive environment promotes student commitment as well as feeds into their intrinsic motivation, resulting in benefits for the classroom community (Bryk and Driscoll, 1988). On what data do they base their claims? Tell more about the research they report.

Psychologist and educational reformer John Dewey was among the first to advocate for the concept of a learning community. According to Dewey (1959), school, being the primary force in young people’s lives, is a critical forum for social learning. Ideally, teachers should, “order the small society of the school to present students with opportunities to become effective members of the society… to form students’ capacity for critical social practice (Bidwell and Friedkin, 1988, p. 4).

For a school or classroom to function as an effective community, there must be an agreed upon set of values and understandings shared by the teachers and students. To be successful, the members of the community need to be committed to the mission and supportive of the constituents (Byrk and Driscoll, 1988). Having shared activities and goals also serve a purpose in establishing community. Doing so facilitates relationships among members and provides opportunities for interaction. These
opportunities provide meaning for the activities and create ownership over the community’s goals (Byrk and Driscoll, 1988).

The ability for students to identify and feel connected to their community is essential in establishing, maintaining and building on their motivation and engagement. This sense of community is built through both social and intellectual interactions, when students set out to achieve academic goals and interact with one another in the classroom (Rovai, 2002).

When students take ownership over their community, they feel that they have obligations to one another and the school. They know that they have educational responsibilities to fulfill and believe that their peers will do the same. Individuals who have a strong sense of community are more motivated and responsible in the classroom than those who do not belong to the community. Essentially, students feel that by actively participating in the community will satisfy their needs (Rovai, 2002).

**Collaboration**

As Vygotsky theorized, learning is borne out of socialization. Through interaction, discussion, exposure and collaboration, students are able to learn from one another. They construct their meanings and understandings through their connections with their peers and their environments. As such, the classroom and the students within it are among the biggest influences in developing student understanding and facilitating learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Examining the classroom through a social learning lens reveals the intricate complexities of relationships and hierarchy of structure that takes place in many
learning environments. Lave and Wenger (1991) looked at this construction of
meaning, learning and understanding as not only the internalization of knowledge, but
also as the process of gaining and establishing membership within a community.
Learning, then, is a function of society, in which members gain access to a community
and become knowledgeably skillful within it. When a community is organized around
a goal or product, those members of the environment collectively form a community
of practice. Each of the members possesses knowledge and skills that can be shared
with other members of the community, and when knowledge is shared collectively, the
community progresses towards its goal. Bayer (1990) added that when groups are
faced with learning challenges, they work together to resolve them, thus learning their
way to resolution. In this sense, learning is amplified through the incorporation of
other viewpoints into an individual’s thought process (Bayer, 1990).

When students recognize that their role within their learning community is
significant, they experience the sense of belonging that they crave. Additionally,
adding components to the classroom that increase students’ reliance on one another
increases their ability to trust their peers, work cooperatively and exist in a team
environment effectively. Out of necessity, students will learn to cooperate with one
another, but their experiences working collaboratively, towards a final goal, will
provide important social experiences as well. Panitz (2000) recognized this feature of
collaborative learning as what sets it definitively apart from simple cooperation. Work
completed between peers not only can help students attain academic achievement, but
it provides them with opportunities to develop their knowledge, language and social skills.

Gillies (2003) showed that when groups were tasked with team-oriented endeavors, they demonstrated high levels of collaboration, higher thinking skills and strong social and communication skills. Collaboration also provides students with opportunities to help one another achieve higher levels of learning. Students are effective communicators are able to enhance the learning of their peers when they worked on joint assignments together (Garton and Pratt, 2001).

Creating collaborative groups, comprised of students with varying skill levels, can provide for effective learning experiences for all the students involved. Wilkinson and Fung (2002) highlighted the significance of the interactions between children of varying skill levels. Students in homogeneous groups did not exhibit the same growths as students who were in groups of mixed abilities. This research supported the suggestion that mixed groupings offer more chances for children to participate in higher level thinking and begin to develop their roles within their social groups (Wilkinson and Fung, 2002). Bayer’s 1990 research also demonstrated this theory. Bayer (1990) wrote, “the more varied the group the more likely someone in the group can be of assistance when the group is engaged in problem solving…Diversity is enriching,” (12).

Collaboration provides clear benefits for students who are able to effectively participate with their peers. In many instances, structures and modeling are necessary for learners to be able to navigate a collaborative environment successfully. Gillies
(2002) found that the task structure and the use of team goal-oriented work affected both the ability of the group to work together and the quality of the learning achieved by the participants. Trueba, Guthrie and Au (1981) also found that students who worked in collaborative learning settings were highly engaged and scored higher on achievement tests than their peers. Tell the details of these studies.

Tunnard and Sharp (2009) found that high school students involved in collaborative learning identified team and goal-oriented tasks as those most likely to produce the best results. The children involved in Tunnard and Sharp’s study (2009) also identified clear instruction, balanced groups and teacher guidance as key factors in determining the success of grouping situations and assignments. These students also pointed out that working among their peers exposed them to additional resources, increased their comfort levels and motivated them to talk about task-related topics (Tunnard and Sharp, 2009). Miell and MacDonald (2000) also had similar findings, claiming that students need continuous opportunities in the classroom to maintain their peer relationships and continue to navigate their learning communities.
IV. REVIEW OF EXISTING MATERIALS

Borrowing from the structures of other subject areas and applying functioning leadership structures to core subject areas could provide significant benefits for students. As such, in this section materials from a variety of content areas will be reviewed and analyzed. Scholastic journalism, leadership programs and standard California ninth grade English curriculum all offer promising elements, but none of the curricula can stand alone as an effective model for creating and facilitating community, collaboration, motivation and engagement. Applying elements from successful journalism courses and effective collaborative leadership concepts from student-lead organizations to the core subject area of English could create an environment that not only supports students’ need for community, but also facilitates motivation and engagement.

Overall, a structural model needs to be created that teachers can apply to a variety of classroom settings. Borrowing successful and effective elements from elective courses, such as journalism or leadership courses can provide an effective scaffold to be used in core content areas. Creating a skeleton for a successful collaborative learning environment that allows for inquiry-based and active learning would fit the needs of classrooms across content areas. These models would provide meaningful learning experiences and students could expand their knowledgeable roles and continue to facilitate the learning of others (Lave and Wenger, 1991).
Journalism Education

With the English content standards in mind, many journalism courses incorporate both collaboration and skill attainment within the course, while matching the curriculum goals with relevant English standards. Efforts to align journalism courses with the college entrance requirements of University of California and California State University schools have also pushed many school districts to remove and scale back collaboration and leadership roles within the curriculum of the class, in order to hit more college preparation targets, as outlined by the universities. The curriculum for the Advanced Journalism students in the Escondido Union High School District requires that participants take on a leadership role on staff, and provides a basic structure for how a newsroom staff should be composed. This model, with student leaders guiding the course alongside the instructor, is a good starting place for an effective leadership model in the classroom. (Gemmel and Young, 2009).

Looking to other resources to supplement the structure at EUHSD provides has helped to create an effective working model for the scholastic newsroom. The Journalism Education Association and the National Scholastic Press Association have created guidelines for student reporters to follow (Journalism Education Association, 2009). These are helpful, when it comes to the content and structure of an appropriate journalism course, but they do little to guide the structuring or leadership process in the classroom. Furthermore, JEA’s standards are structured for the journalism teacher, rather than the leadership team of students who should be running the classroom. Translating these standards to reflect the needs of a student leadership team has
helped make them effective for classrooms where students are running the show (Journalism Education Association, 2002). JEA places the power and governance of the classroom in the hands of the students, which is key in creating ownership over the work produced in the classroom (Salisbury, 2005).

Additionally, the Society of Professional Journalists has a designated code of ethics for journalism. The code of ethics doesn’t provide a hierarchy or structure that students can or should follow, but it does effectively model the kinds of traits that ethical journalists should possess (Society of Professional Journalists, 2010). This model helps students maintain a positive, safe and supportive environment in the classroom, while also uniting students with a common set of values. The EUHSD curriculum also recognizes the importance of ethical responsibility, and lessons on this area are incorporated into the curriculum. But the challenge lies in the extension from those lessons into practice in the classroom. The guidelines that both JEA and SPJ provide are effectively utilized in the structure and organization of the student staffs in the EUHSD. Students in these courses are aware of their journalistic, moral and ethical responsibilities, and peers are constantly working collaboratively to uphold the ideals of SPJ and JEA (Gemmel and Young, 2009).

The scholastic newsroom also provides an excellent deadline cycle model that can be applied to unit studies in other content areas. The cyclical production schedule that a publications course requires provides an excellent working model for a team-based unit that could easily be applied in any content area. EUHSD publications courses follow a six week deadline cycle that is repeated over the course of the year.
Each of the cycles has a subject area focus and while the students are working on individual projects for completion of the publication, they are also doing activities that help master the highlighted skill for the cycle (Gemmel and Young, 2009).

The EUHSD curriculum, for example, has student leaders introducing a concept to the class at the beginning of the week with a short lesson. Each subsequent day that the class meets, the students work in their newspaper section groups (Features, Sports, etc.) on their articles, as well as on small assignments that support the concept that was introduced for that cycle. The students work collaboratively, both to finish their stories, but to obtain the skills and apply them to their own work. Throughout the cycle, the students meet with editors, other peers and the adviser to work on and improve their stories, with special attention paid to the skill being focused on. At the end of the cycle, the students have not only met numerous periodic deadlines, but also improved their writing with the help of their peers and mentors. Within each of their section groups, the students are tested and scored collectively on a short assignment that focuses on the skill or theme of that deadline cycle (Gemmel and Young, 2009).

Effectively grouping students into teams and having them follow a similar cycle would create a collaborative environment that students could benefit from. If English units or History lessons were paced alongside this type of model, the students could work within their groups, alongside their peers, towards mastery of a skill. They would have the added benefits of socialization, as well as additional exposure to resources among their peers (Tunnard and Sharp, 2009).
In the scholastic newsroom, students are reliant on the success of their peers. They work together on assignments throughout the deadline cycles, but even their independent work dictates the success of the class as a whole. This unique component of the class adds ownership and responsibility to the tasks that the students complete, as they know that their peers are relying on them to produce (Walker and Greene, 2009). In a traditional classroom environment, students would simply be working for their own grade. The journalism classroom not only recognizes the work of the students of individuals in the grading system, but also how they work with their peers and what they contribute to the final product that the class creates for each deadline cycle. This component of the class provides for the feeling of belonging and need that many students crave—their peers can’t complete their assignments without them. For many students, this element ensures that they are motivated to complete their tasks because they know that someone else is counting on them to get their work done; their peers need them to finish their assignments (Walker and Greene, 2009).

Other elective courses also provide collaborative and team-oriented environments that could beneficially influence other content areas. Courses where students must work together to achieve goals could provide a necessary blueprint to help guide core subject areas in creating team-based curriculum.

**Leadership Instruction**

Programs that focus on leadership instruction provide excellent models for the way peer mediated learning can happen in the classroom. When students are tasked with projects and can help guide one another towards success, community is built and
the student relationships can progress. Programs like Student Government, Peer-mentoring organizations (i.e. Peer Leaders Uniting Students [PLUS]) and other leadership-based classes have curricula that guide class structure. These suggested models often propose structures that leave the authority in the hands of the teacher, but allows the students to exercise certain amounts of influence and control over the content. This model creates an environment that lends itself more to cooperative work, rather than collaborative (Vandenburgh, 2010).

Panitz (1996) clarified the differences between cooperation and collaboration. In a cooperative learning situation, the environment is more “…directive than a collaborative system of governance and is closely controlled by the teacher. While there are many mechanisms for group analysis and introspection the fundamental approach is teacher centered whereas collaborative learning is more student centered” (p. 2).

In an organization like PLUS, students are tasked with mediating student-centered issues through effective communication and collaboration. PLUS advisers have the freedom to evaluate their personal classroom environments and determine how much intervention and direct instruction is needed on behalf of the teacher. With the teacher in control of the class, students can retain the sense of support and guidance, but the instructor can determine how much power to put in the hands of the students. By relinquishing some control to students working in groups, the teacher allows students to explore their resources, get to know their peers and find answers in alternative ways. Much like students in a leadership classroom have to network with
one another, compile resources and expand their knowledge base in order to complete activities. The structures and relationships that team and leadership driven classes activate provide a scaffold that can be used in almost any environment (Vandenburgh, 2010).

Johnson et al. (1990) point out that one of the many strengths of collaborative learning is its versatility. “Structures may be used repeatedly with almost any subject matter, at a wide range of grade levels and at various points in a lesson plan,” which allows for application across content areas (Johnson et al., 1990).

As students gain comfort with and adapt to collaborative environments, they become more willing to assume leadership roles among their peers. This is traditionally seen in courses that allow students to repeat them year after year for additional elective credit. Both leadership and journalism courses offer this benefit to students in many Southern California schools. More skilled students are able to share their knowledge with less skilled students in the class. This sharing-teaching-learning relationship becomes a cycle in the classroom, as the course progresses (Bransford, 2000). Even though the ideal English student would only take a course a single time, this model could still easily be applied to this content area. There will be a natural stratification of student skills in a standard classroom, and it is safe to assume that more advanced learners could act as a resource to those who are struggling (Bransford, 2000).
**English Curriculum**

The current English/Language Arts content standards that are adopted in the state of California do little to outline any sort of collaboration in the classroom. While there are areas, such as Speaking and Listening, that suggest goals for students interacting with one another, there is no collaboration specifically addressed in the standards. The state standards simply outline the learning goals that students should obtain for each grade level and leave it up to the teacher and the textbooks to figure how to get the students there. Nothing is suggested by the text that would generate positive levels of engagement or motivation—the materials are simply set up for the attainment of the standards and nothing else. There is no support offered by the text to facilitate a sense of community or ownership in the classroom.

Currently, the EUHSD is using the 2002 adoption of McDougal Littel. While the content is arguably outdated, that is the least of the problems presented by the materials. The teacher’s edition of the text provides lesson plans, testing documents, activities and assessments. These materials are tailored to fit the materials provided in the textbook and make suggestions for teaching approaches. Unfortunately, the suggestions do little to encourage teachers to engage students in collaborative learning. The teacher’s edition of the text correlates each suggested lesson to the state standards, but don’t effectively address the need for collaboration, motivation and engagement in the classroom (Applebee, 2002).

Suggested activities include having students made collages that depict their actions to a given text, write short, reflective responses and answer reading comprehension questions after completing a passage (Applebee, 2002). While there is
nothing wrong with these activities individually, if a teacher does nothing to facilitate interaction between and among students, many opportunities for collaboration are lost. Asking students to share responses, create group collages or compose a collective summary of a reading would all be methods in which collaboration could be infused in the currently adopted curriculum.

Many teachers also choose to supplement the curriculum with materials they find on their own. Teachers are able to introduce students to current resources that may be pertinent to their lives. This approach allows teachers to find articles, stories and novels that are relevant to the students and help increase their engagement in the classroom. Coupling this strategy with a group or team-oriented setting could provide significant benefits for students.

While the curriculum that EUHSD uses supports the attainment of the state standards, more can be done to make the materials effective. If teachers want to provide students with well-rounded educational experiences, they must also address the social needs of their students. Incorporating collaborative elements into the classroom and teaching students how to work with and support one another would provide a powerful compliment to the academically based curriculum.

**Creation of the Collaboration in Action Curriculum**

In order to create an environment that both meets students’ needs for support, as well as facilitating social and academic growth through community, collaboration and motivation, I borrowed structural elements from a variety of subject areas. English content standards obviously provide the necessary academic rigor for a successful
Language Arts course, while collaborative models can be transferred from elective courses, such as scholastic journalism and PLUS.

In a collaborative classroom, students can redefine their roles. They will be simultaneous learners and teachers. They will act as supporters and resources for one another. They will become integral parts of a team, working to achieve essential learning goals and complete assignments. This project focused on the impact that a collaborative learning environment has on the levels of motivation and engagement among students in a low-achieving ninth grade English class.

The models that both scholastic journalism and leadership course, like PLUS, utilize provided a necessary scaffold to model the English classroom organization after. Imparting a team-oriented atmosphere and outlining collaborative expectations set the tone for a new classroom model and the students were able to imagine themselves in new roles. Activities that facilitated a sense of community, like ice-breaker games, were used to help the students begin to buy in to the new community they were establishing.
V. OVERVIEW OF THE COLLABORATION IN ACTION CURRICULUM

After three years of advising student publications, I realized that I had something special in my classroom. I had incredibly motivated and dedicated students to their classroom pursuits. The circumstances of my journalism classroom are arguably unique—it is an elective course, which the students can repeat year after year, and the students tend to be very high achieving. While those factors definitely impact the journalism classroom environment, they are not the only things that contribute to the effective learning environment. I knew that there was more to what makes journalism class work and that knowledge was the impetus for this project. It has become my hope that taking a closer look at what drives student learning in collaborative learning environments will provide a blueprint that other teachers and advisers can apply and adapt to their own classrooms, regardless of what content area they teach.

In my experience, as both a beginning teacher and new adviser, knowing where to start in the classroom is often one of most daunting challenges. How can a teacher effectively set up his or her classroom in a way that provides an environment in which students want to learn and participate? How can curriculum be structured so that participants are actively engaged and receptive throughout the learning process? How can students be organized in order to create a productive and effective work and learning environment that provides authentic experiences?

This project was set into motion when I decided to take what I deemed to be the most significant elements of my journalism classroom and apply them outside of
that context. In order to determine what exactly it was about my classroom that made things function at such a high level, I had to test things out. I developed a curriculum that reflects the structures of the scholastic newsroom, while adhering to the curricular demands of a core subject area (in this case, English). The lessons are tailored to the class reading of a novel, with activities and assignments written with both individual and group expectations in mind. The learning goals and unit structure reflect the demands of a deadline-driven environment and the classroom composition is built around the necessity of student collaboration.

The relationships that developed in the journalism classroom are both collaborative and cooperative. Students develop natural leadership roles within their smaller groups and begin to mentor and assist one another. As a classroom that is always student centered and student choice driven, journalism provides an opportunity for a learner centered environment, and allows students to gain new knowledge while still working within their comfort zones (Rogoff and Wertsch, 1984). Journalism also provided the necessary scaffolding that learners may need in order to achieve a level of comfort in the classroom. With experienced students leading and educating new students, apprenticeships are naturally created in this environment (Bransford, 2000). By placing my English students into groups and giving them group-oriented expectations, I hoped to gain the same sorts of results that my students in journalism produced. Using grouping strategies that paired higher achieving students with those who struggled would allow for the apprentice style relationships that journalism
fostered and having students work in small groups or teams would help establish a sense of community.

My English class would, obviously, lack many of the components of my journalism class—the returning students, for example and the product-driven nature of the course. But, I was convinced that these were not integral elements of the success in my classroom. My goal became to develop a collaborative learning environment model that would increase the motivation and engagement levels among my ninth grade English students. Without the experience of returning students to rely on, and the comfort of knowing that my students had elected to take my course, creating a structure to use in a core content area was a daunting task. Despite the inherent challenges, though, I knew that the team-oriented and collaborative nature of my journalism class were things that I could translate into my English classroom. I also knew that expecting students to work together, rely on one another and support one another would not be demands that my English students could not meet.

For many teachers who take on the task of creating curriculum, the challenge is often in finding the safe balance between what students know and what they do not. Presenting new material that pushes them appropriately, without frustrating them entirely, can be a cumbersome task—especially in classrooms with wide ranges of student ability. By providing learning opportunities that are multidimensional, teachers can help students function within their comfort zones, while having the support of their peers and structured classroom activities to compensate for their potential knowledge shortcomings. Teachers who can develop complex, realistic, challenging
and varied assignments are capable of providing an environment where students can uncover, develop and combine their strengths in areas where they are lacking. Structuring a curriculum that facilitates group work, social interaction and cooperative assignments opens the door for students to flex their multiple intelligences and help one another learn (Oakes and Lipton, 2003).

Allowing students to learn through interaction is an effective strategy that promises many benefits for students. Learning, according to Vygotsky, could not happen without social engagement. The necessity for interaction explains why some environments are much better for learning than others and why some courses, like journalism, have high levels of student motivation and engagement. Without collaboration and cooperation, students are limited by their own ZPDs, but when they have access to peers as resources what they can achieve is much greater. Classrooms that are structured to provide these opportunities become rich learning communities, where student motivation and engagement can develop (Oakes and Lipton, 2003).

Additionally, students who participate in these sorts of learning communities are likely to have stronger social skills and a great connection to the school community, bolstering their sense of need and drive to do well academically (Juvonen and Wetzel, 1996).

Heterogeneous grouping creates the ideal environment for students to exercise their skills. More capable students can assist struggling students and each group member can act as a resource to his or her peers. Having a sense of community, or contribution to a team environment, is also a motivating factor for students (Juvonen
and Wetzel, 1996). When students feel that the work they are doing is authentic, that their work is real and their contributions are valuable, they become invested in the group’s work. Students, then, become active participants in the community of learning, contributing to the tasks at hand and becoming authentically engaged in the activities (Lave and Wenger, 2008).

It is with the constructs collaboration, community, engagement and motivation in mind that Collaboration In Action was developed. Creating a classroom environment that lends itself to the ideal, structured learning community previously described is what this project set out to accomplish. Several overarching goals were considered during the creation of the curriculum.

Goals

The aim of this project was to answer the essential question, “What impact does a collaborative learning environment have on student engagement?” In order to assess the impact of this project and outline overall goals, several factors were considered. First, the curriculum provides a simple, skeletal structure for classroom organization. This structure situates students in such a way that they develop dependent and collaborative working relationships with their peers. The group setting provides students the opportunity to function within their zones of proximal development, with flexible working opportunities that are neither too simple nor too complex. This model is intended to encourage students to expand their ZPDs, through providing many opportunities for social interaction with peers.
The structure of the curriculum itself was also intended to increase student motivation. Working collaboratively provided students with additional resources and opportunities for learning. There was also an increased expectation for production from other students. Many of the assignments that comprised the curriculum required participation and input from all group members, ensuring that each student contributed to the final product. All of these factors combined provided opportunities for students to ratchet up their motivation and buy into the project. With a various assignments that all students contributed to, the unit created the ideal community environment described by Lave and Wenger (2008). Additionally, small groups created a low-risk environment that encourages students to engage themselves in a community that feels safe and familiar to them (Wolf and Fraser, 2008).

The nature of *Collaboration in Action* also provided a setting in which there were high levels of engagement. Much of the curriculum was dependent on discussion and collaborative work among students. The students were provided with opportunities to discuss their thoughts, ideas and beliefs with their small groups and with the class as a whole. Talking and writing components, as well as group and individual assignments, gave students avenues for engaging themselves in the class. This process is supported by the findings of Delpit (1998), who argued that it is important for students to feel like their voices are heard in the classroom.

**Curriculum Design**

*Collaboration In Action* provided both a structure for classroom set up as well as a guided curriculum that can be easily applied across content areas. Through this
project, students are placed into heterogeneous groups that work collaboratively on a series of assignments, throughout the unit of study. During the six-week curriculum, students are guided through a novel study, while simultaneously completing both group-oriented and individual tasks. The unit culminates with a final exam that is developed by the students themselves.

For many students, a group-driven environment is new and daunting. Adding to this, the students will also be working largely with peers that they are unfamiliar with—with one exception. Prior to the creation of the groups, students are allowed to pick one person that they would like to work with. As the groups are structured, efforts are made to honor the students’ requests. This provides students with some sense of security, while pushing them to forge new relationships with their peers. As the groups develop, the teacher can model, scaffold and demonstrate appropriate group behaviors and dynamics. From there, the group members build off of the example that is set by the teacher. The class collectively creates expectations for group members and the teacher, and those expectations act as guidelines for student behavior throughout the unit.

The curriculum begins with a class selection of a novel. Providing students with a feeling of choice provides an opportunity for ownership and engagement in the project from its initiation. Following this selection, students complete author-study projects that allow them to familiarize themselves with the author of the book. Each group compiles their collective research into a single author biography to turn in, indicating which group members contributed which elements of the assignment.
Each week, students work through a variety of smaller assignments that prepare them to complete a new writing task. The chapters of the novel they are reading serve as the impetus for each of the writing assignments, which build off of the smaller activities and require the cooperation of all the group members. Depending on the style of writing being addressed, students within groups may be completing varied tasks, or all may be working on the same thing. At the conclusion of each week of study, groups have a completed and polished piece of writing that reflects a certain style or genre.

**General Curriculum Features**

There are both individual and group assignments that, combined, provide the basis for this curriculum. In addition to the actual assignments, each class meeting provides opportunity for group and class wide discussion and interaction among students.

**Journals**

Journal topics are directly related to the area of discussion for the day or the week. The students begin by composing their journals on their own, and then sharing their writing with their group members. After the groups have a chance to discuss, the class approaches the topic as a whole. Journals are often the source of ideas for writing assignments as well.

**Chapter Review Questions and Activities**

Each chapter has an accompanying set of questions and activities that the students complete in their groups. The activities focus on reading comprehension and
understanding. Students have an opportunity to ask questions and get clarification from their peers and the teacher during this time.

**Quizzes**

The students are quizzed over the novel and their reading assignments. Some of these quizzes are independent and some of them are group-based. Because students not know what kind of quiz they are going to be taking, they have to rely on the members of their group to come to class prepared.

**Writing Assignments**

Each week, the content of the novel inspires a different style of writing. Each student works on specific elements of the weekly style, compiling smaller assignments into a complete work by the end of the week. Within the groups, students work together on writing tasks, selecting the strongest writing from each group member to be shared with the class or used for a group writing piece.

**Evaluations**

As assignments are completed during this unit, the students evaluate their own performance and the performance of their peers. They have to assign grades to their counterparts and describe the work that each participant completed. The evaluations are a chance for the students to express concerns so that problems can be addressed before the next group assignment.
**Final Study Guide**

As the students read, each group composes reading comprehension questions from each chapter. These questions are compiled into a study guide that is distributed to all students. These questions are also used for the final exam content.

**Final Exam**

Using the questions composed by each of the groups, a final exam is created. The students have the contents of the exam to study before the test is given. The final exam is taken individually, with opportunity for revision and work amongst group members after it is initially graded. The test can be resubmitted after the group review time for additional make up credit.

**Conclusion**

*Collaboration in Action* aims to marry the success of the journalism classroom with the rich content of a core subject area. By structuring the classroom in a way that requires students to forge relationships with and rely on one another, the traditional classroom dynamic changes. Students are working for more than just their own grade and they know that their peers need them to complete assignments successfully. Additionally, the group setting provides students with a comfortable environment where they can approach new content and ideas with adequate resources and guidance. Even though the core content area classroom is a very different place than an elective class environment, a curriculum like *Collaboration in Action* can facilitate opportunities for motivation and engagement in students, through authentic and collaborative learning. The structure and contents of this curriculum ensures that
students will work together and engage in the material in ways they may not have had an opportunity to before.
VI. IMPLEMENTATION AND REVISION OF COLLABORATION IN ACTION

While there are a variety of factors that make this implementation unique, 
*Collaboration In Action* could easily be carried out in any classroom. The structures and ideas that the curriculum supports translate across content areas and lend themselves well to adaptation in other content areas. Even though *Collaboration in Action* was modeled after the structures in a journalism classroom and implemented in an English class, the curriculum could be simply modified to work alongside a variety of units in almost any subject area.

The School

Located in San Diego County, MySchool High School (all place and student names are pseudonyms) does not mimic the conceptions that many outsiders hold about the wealthy residents that are commonly associated with southern California. North San Diego County is the second most populated region in Southern California, after San Diego with an estimated population of 826,985. The median household income for San Diego County was nearly $63,000 in 2009. The major North County cities reported median incomes that ranged from $64,000 to $71,000. Hometown, the city in which MySchool High School resides, only reported a $41,000 median household income for the same year.

MySchool High School is one of three comprehensive high schools in the Hometown Union High School District. The school is located in the southeastern end of Hometown, a suburban San Diego county community with a broad-based economy including retail trade, service industry, light manufacturing, and agriculture. MySchool
families are mostly in the low to middle income segments. Over the past several years there has been a significant increase in the population of Hispanic students (rising to about 77 percent from about 45 percent), English Learner (EL) students (25 percent), and socio-economically disadvantaged students (rising to about 75 percent from roughly 43 percent) at MySchool.

MySchool High School provides a high quality, standards-based education focused on the UC/CSU “a-g” requirements, and California State Requirements. MySchool High School puts an intense and heavy focus meeting the “a-g” requirements for all students (even those who do not plan to go on to college).

In addition to the many challenging course offerings on campus, the staff and administration provide diverse extra-curricular activities including sports, special interest clubs, after school and Saturday tutoring programs, an asset based (ABC) after school program, community service opportunities, and job training. MySchool also has developed many support mechanisms that help students successfully navigate through high school in general and through the various post-secondary options available to them. MySchool High School is a National Demonstration School for the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) program, and a Demonstration School for the ABC program that supports nearly 40 different after-school extra-curricular tutoring and special interest clubs.

In addition to these programs, MySchool High School is also home to one of the leading student publication programs in San Diego County. The publications at MySchool High School consistently place in honored categories in local, state and
national competitions. Many San Diego County high schools look to the model set forth by MySchool High School student publications when structuring their own newspaper and yearbook programs. National organizations like the Journalism Education Association and the National Scholastic Press Association have awarded MySchool’s programs with awards of distinction and marks of high merit. Additionally, national publishing company, Walsworth Yearbooks, Inc., inducted MySchool’s publication to their Gallery of Excellence in 2010.

While there are many achievements that can be attributed to the students and faculty at MySchool High School, there are a variety of challenges that the school community is facing. Enrollment, demographics and socioeconomic status have drastically changed in Hometown over the last decade, changing the face of the typical MySchool student. The classroom make up at MySchool High School is constantly fluctuating. Total enrollment increased 7 percent by 2005-06 school year, then decreased 2 percent by 2008-09 school year. It is projected that enrollment numbers will continue to dip for the next several years. Small ethnic group (Pacific Islander, Native American, etc.) enrollment percentages have remained consistent, though. The percentage of the Hispanic population has consistently increased over a six-year period, totaling an increase of 15.2 percentage points. The percentage of the Caucasian population has consistently decreased over the same period, totaling a decrease of 15.6 percentage points. The number of EL students has fluctuated, reaching a high of 594 (25.5 percent of total student population) in 2008-09, a 4.8 percent increase from the
previous year. The percentage of both EL and redesignated Spanish speakers has remained consistent in the 90+ percent range.

Changes in the socioeconomic status in the typical MySchool family have impacted campus as well. MySchool High School has a higher percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch than the district as a whole over the six-year period, ranging from a 13 percent difference in 2003-04 to a 19-20 percent difference in 2008-09. The percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch has increased from 28.5 percent of the total student population in 2003-04 to 67.9 percent in 2008-09. This change is an increase of 139 percent.

Because of the high rates of poverty and the socioeconomic status of the students at MySchool High School, it is designated as a Title I school. As Title I school, MySchool receives additional federal funding to combat the challenges that economically disadvantaged students face. This policy was designed to help schools close the achievement gap between low-income students and other students. The policy was rewritten in 1994 to improve fundamental goals of helping at-risk students. With the implementation of No Child Left Behind, schools must make adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state testing and focus on best teaching practices in order to continue receiving funds (California Department of Education, 2011).

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act requires all states to implement statewide accountability checks that are based on state standards for reading and mathematics, annual testing for all students in grades three through eight, and annual statewide progress goals, aiming to have all students obtaining mastery within 12
years. Assessment results are analyzed through a number of different lenses, including socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency to ensure that group is ignored. Schools that do not meet their Adequate Yearly Progress goals toward statewide proficiency goals are subject to improvement and corrective action measures. Schools that undergo these measures because of failure to meet AYP goals are considered to be in Program Improvement (California Department of Education, 2011).

Despite its distinctions and honors, MySchool High School entered its first year of program improvement in 2010-2011. The school, as well as the district, has not met the AYP requirements for the past two years. Teachers and administrators have responded to this lack of growth by zeroing in on areas that are lacking. As a school site, MySchool High School fell short of the AYP standards in English/Language Arts, failing to have enough students test at a proficient level in this subject area on the state-administered standardized tests. While MySchool High School doubled its targeted growth in API (12 points, instead of the goal of six), California High School Exit Exam (CHSEE) scores placed the campus in Program Improvement.

Graduation rates have also been a concern for the staff of MySchool High School. Over the past several years, there has been a steady decrease in the number of graduating seniors. Graduation rate has steadily declined since 2005, dropping 13 percentage points by 2009 to a six-year low of 73.8 percent. The percentage of Hispanic and Caucasian seniors who graduate has been in continual decline since 2004. The Hispanic graduation rate decreased nearly 6 percentage points in 2007,
reaching a low of 70 percent in 2009. The Caucasian graduation rate reached a low of 79 percent in 2007, then increased by 9 percentage points over the next two years, reaching a four-year high of 88 percent in 2009. The gap between the percent of Hispanic seniors and Caucasian seniors who graduate has decreased, reaching a difference of only 4 percentage points in 2007. In 2008, the gap increased to a difference of 12 percentage points, with another gap increase to 18 points in 2009.

Even though graduation rates are decreasing, MySchool High School is seeing a positive shift in its drop out rates. The dropout rate has consistently been much lower than the district, county, and state's rates. While their rates have generally increased over the years, MySchool’s has steadily decreased, except for the sharp increase in 2006-07. Seniors consistently make up the largest percentage of dropouts, dipping below the 50 percent rate only in 2005-06, and reaching a high of 87 percent of the total dropouts in 2008-09. The percentage of the Hispanic/Latino population that drops out has generally decreased each year, again except in 2006-07 where it was still only 2 percent, dropping to a low of only 1 percent in both 2008 and 2009. Hispanic/Latino, English Learner, and Severely Emotionally Disturbed (SED) students generally make up the largest percentage of MySchool’s dropouts. Nearly 90 percent of the students who exit MySchool High School either graduate or enroll in another school. Students who do not meet graduation requirements typically choose to extend their time at MySchool High School and return for a fifth year of course work. Other students elect the option to transfer to the Adult Education division within the district to fulfill their graduation requirements.
Overall, MySchool High School is working proactively to provide for the wide range of needs of its students. Despite its status in Program Improvement, measures are being taken by teachers and administrators to ensure that all MySchool students are granted access to the best education possible. This includes allowing elective course offerings, Advanced Placement offerings and core class section numbers to be driven by student enrollment and student choice. The administrative staff at MySchool High School recognizes that by providing students with elective options and enriching curricular experiences, they are making strides towards achieving AYP goals and preparing students for life beyond high school.

The Model Course

The environment in a beginning/advanced journalism combination class inspired this curriculum. The class, which satisfies the UC “g” requirement elective for all students, produces the school newspaper. It is a yearlong course, which students can repeat for all four years of high school. The class is run by a student editorial board, which is voted into office at the close of each academic year. The students make all content decisions, as well as assign stories, responsibilities and delegate miscellaneous tasks. The editorial board is in charge of guiding and conducting the class, ensuring that students are completing their tasks and meeting necessary deadlines to meet the publication demands for the paper.

The structure of the class adheres to a five-week deadline cycle. Over the course of the cycle, all students engage in brainstorming activities and work collaboratively to generate content ideas of the upcoming issue of the paper. The
editorial board assigns stories to each student in the class and the reporters spend the majority of the five-week period researching, writing and editing their stories. The final week of the deadline cycle is dedicating to the layout and publication of the school newspaper. Assignments are staggered throughout the process, reinforcing the goals of the course, working to meet curricular requirements and ensuring that the students’ writing assignments are up to publication standards. The students work collaboratively to print a twelve-page newspaper every month (with the exception of November), with a total of eight issues over the course of the academic year.

Over the course of the school year, the deadline cycles are aligned with certain writing skills or goals. The year starts with basic journalistic skills and builds upon them, so that each deadline cycle introduces a new concept, idea, writing style or method. At the completion of the school year, the students have worked their way through all the major journalistic styles of writing and have learned about and implemented the skills necessary for many key jobs of journalists.

The nature of the course requires that the students be capable of wearing many hats. Not only are editors also writers, but writers also act as photographers, page designers, copy editors and any other tasks related to the publication of the paper. The students are also part of section teams (based on the section of the paper that they are writing for), which comprise the overall staff team. Each writer knows that the success of his or her team hinges on the completion of the story he or she has been assigned. Additionally, as stories are completed, they go through several rounds of student editing before being published. Every story has the input and oversight of several
students before it is printed in the paper, demonstrating the strength of a team effort to the students.

Finally, because the students can repeat the course, year after year for credit, there are natural mentoring relationships that occur in the classroom. More experienced students take on the responsibility of teaching many lessons and assisting students in obtaining the skills necessary to be a productive member of the staff. As the academic year progresses, experienced students impart their knowledge on younger staff members, helping them reaching new levels of comfort with their journalistic and social skill sets and prepare to teach other students the same skills.

On campus, the journalism students are well respected and have, as a publication team, earned numerous awards and recognitions. The students are highly motivated and extremely invested in the product that they put out. They regulate their own work ethic and take their newspaper duties very seriously. Driven by their investment and ownership in the overall product, the students are very focused and hard working.

Within the class, there are typically students from all grade levels. For example, in the 2010-2011 school year, there were 40 students enrolled in the class. Of the 40, 12 were freshmen, nine were sophomores, eight were juniors and 11 students were seniors. Because the students have the opportunity to take the course more than once for repeated credit, many of the students had previously taken journalism. 17 of the 40 students had taken the journalism class prior to the 2010-2011 school year.
Demographically, the journalism class is usually a relatively homogeneous group. In 2010-11, of the 40 students, 85 percent are Caucasian and all the white students, save one, were designated as English-only speakers. Ten percent of the class is comprised of students who are of Asian decent. The remaining five percent of students are Hispanic students who have been redesignated as fully proficient in English. Several of the students (15 percent) are fluent in more than one language. All students identify English as their primary language, but students in journalism are also fluent in Tagalong, Spanish, Portuguese and Mandarin.

The students within the journalism class typically represent the upper end of their respective grade levels, based on overall grade point averages. The 2010-11 seniors in journalism included the valedictorian and salutatorian, as well as several other members of the upper 10 percent of the class of 2011 (based on cumulative grade point average) and the junior class honor guard. Beyond this, many journalism students are also involved in extra curricular clubs and honors programs, such as Key Club and National Honor Society. Additionally, students who participate in journalism are actively involved in sports on campus and many work part-time jobs outside of school.

While there are many factors that contributed to the productivity and effectiveness of the journalism class, the developed curriculum mirrored the collaborative learning situations and structured environment that have developed in the model course. The implementation borrowed and adapted the structures used in the
journalism class and applied them to a collaborative learning project in a ninth grade English classroom.

**The Implementation Class**

This implementation took place across two standard college-prep ninth grade English classes. Both classes were comprised of a variety of students, with varying skill levels. The majority of the students performed either at or below grade level in areas of reading and writing. The majority of the students were English Language Learners, who primarily spoke Spanish outside of school. The two classes include 64 students, 33 of whom are designated EL students. An additional 25 students were previously designated as EL students, but have been reclassified as English-proficient. The district categorized the remaining six students as English-only speakers. The classes also include seven special education students.

Of the 64 students in the two classes, 60 of them have been enrolled in the class since the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year. Twenty-seven of the 60 students received a failing grade for the first semester of English 9. In the same semester, 15 students received Cs, eight earned Bs and there were 10 As between the two classes.
California Standards Test data was only available for 53 of the 64 students, but the information provided accurately reflects the skill breakdown within the classes. On the English/Language Arts CST from 2009-2010, 5.6 percent of the students scored at the far below basic level. About 23 percent of students scored at the below basic level. The majority of the students (50.94 percent) were considered basic, according to their scores. Nineteen percent of the students were categorized as proficient and 1.89 percent were regarded as advanced. Generally speaking, the students tended to score better in the English/Language Arts area of the CST than on any other subject area in the exam.
The Teacher

I am in my third year of teaching at MySchool High School. I started out teaching remedial English 9, Journalism and California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) Prep. I then took over the Yearbook program and restructured and taught that course, in addition to standard English 10 and Journalism. At the time of implementation, I taught two sections of standard English 9, two sections of Yearbook and a single section of Newspaper. My future at My School High School has me teaching all elective courses—yearbook, newspaper and photography/photojournalism.
I received my Bachelor’s degree in Journalism and Anthropology from San Diego State University in 2007. I also received my single subject teaching credential in English from SDSU. My student teaching was completed at in southeastern San Diego County at both the middle and high school levels. Both of my student teaching assignments were at schools that have demographics similar to MySchool High School. As a student teacher, my experiences focused on working with at-risk youth who came from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Professionally, I am an active member of the Journalism Education Association and the National Scholastic Press Association. I am a 2009 fellow of the American Society of News Editors’ Reynolds Institute (Arizona State University, Phoenix), where I focused much of my energy on creating effective teaching tools for journalism educators. My involvement in these organizations, and my belief in the power of effective journalism education served as the impetus for this project. I saw the way that my newspaper functioned and I noted that it was very different from both the experiences many other advisers have had and my own experience in core subject classes, and I knew I wanted to figure out what it was about that journalism class that was so effective. I imagined an English class that had the same levels of motivation, dedication and work ethic as the journalism class and I hoped that I could work towards making that a reality. In creating Collaboration in Action, I applied what I had learned through my experience in the journalism classroom and hoped to improve upon what frustrated me about my English courses. I wanted to eliminate the vast
differences in the environments between my core class and the electives that I taught; I wanted all of my courses to feel like communities.

Implementation

Several activities were carried out before the actual implementation took place. It was critical to complete these projects before the unit started so that future activities could be carried out with specific considerations in mind. These pre-implementation activities were necessary in order to set the stage for the upcoming curriculum; it was necessary to gather foundational data.

Pre Implementation Activities

Prior to starting the Collaboration In Action curriculum, my students were presented with three novel choices. They were told that the next unit of study they would be doing would be over one of the novels (Animal Farm by George Orwell, Parrot in the Oven by Victor Martinez, or Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry), but they would be responsible for deciding which novel the class would read. This activity was designed to provide students with immediate ownership over their learning experience.

The students were allowed to break into their own groups of four to five students and then each group selected a novel to review. The students were given thirty minutes to utilize classroom resources to help them shape their opinions about the novel. Several resources were provided for each of the books—reviews, articles and summaries were printed from the Internet and provided to the groups. Additionally, the students used teacher materials that were associated with the books
and performed additional online research. At the conclusion of the allotted time period, each group gave a brief presentation on their book of choice. The presentations were intended to give a short summary of the book’s content, highlight information from the provided reviews, discuss any pros and cons of the piece and present information about the author the story. After each group was given the opportunity to present on their book choices, there was a brief period where the groups discussed all of their options and brainstormed any questions that they may have had about the other novels. Questions were addressed with the whole class and discussed. At the conclusion of the questioning and discussion, the students voted for the novel that they wanted to read. The students overwhelmingly chose to read Victor Martinez’s *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* (87% selected this novel). Many students selected this novel based on the content and the connection with their personal backgrounds, demographics and socioeconomic standing. In short, *Parrot in the Oven* was about someone like them and they could identify with the scenarios presented in the novel.

While the students were working in their self-selected groups, I was able to take note of a variety of factors. I could easily see which students gravitated towards others, which students stayed away from each other and which students seemed disconnected from the activity as a whole. It was also easy for me to see which students surfaced as leaders within their groups and which ones seemed to ride the coattails of their peers. This allowed me to create a sociogram (see appendix) depicting the relationships that played out in the classroom. The sociogram would help
me to later group the students into heterogeneous groups that varied in skill level, as well as leadership and cooperation abilities.

After the novel was selected, the students were required to complete a survey that targeted their feelings about working with their peers. The survey asked them to rate their feelings about working with others, their levels of motivation and their ability to learn successfully in a group setting. It also asked students to discuss their feeling about relying on their peers, their work ethic and their interest in reading. Overall, the survey was intended to provide establishing data, prior to the start of the Collaboration In Action curriculum. Additionally, the final question of the survey allowed students to pick a “buddy” in class that they would like to work with for the upcoming project. This information was helpful in the creation of groups, as it allowed me to make comfortable groups for the students, while still introducing them to other peers and working/learning styles.

Using the information gathered during observation, the sociogram, student responses, CST scores and grade report data, the students were then broken into heterogeneous groups. Students were paired with their “buddies” and then groups were built around the pairs. The class was broken into six groups of students, with four or five students in each group (see appendix). Other than the “buddy” that the students chose, the rest of their group members were students who were not friends with the pair (based on the sociogram observations). Groups were then structured based off the CST score data, demographic data, gender and language classification. Each group was balanced, based on gender, and skill levels varied in each clustering. Every group
had at least one student who had demonstrated strong skills and another student who had a history of struggling academically.

Once students were broken into their groups, they were presented with the general outline of the curriculum. They were introduced to the idea that they would be working on a collaborative project that required input and participation from all the members in their groups. It was also revealed to the students that their grades could potentially be impacted by the work of their peers, and that it was important for them to regulate and motivate one another. Given this information, the students were then asked to complete their first task as a group. While they were initially apprehensive to embark on a task with students they were not familiar with, the students seemed to embrace the change in structure, despite its foreign nature. Even though they were working with new people, the students appeared more engaged and invested in the first task they completed. More students finished this assignment completely and all the students who were asked were able to discuss the assignment fully.

The students were asked to make a three-column chart. Each column of the chart was intended to represent a different set of behaviors. The first column was labeled “Good Group Members,” the second was “Poor Group Members” and the final column said, “Teacher.” In each category, the students were to list the sorts of behaviors and things that persons in each category should or should not do. The groups first filled these charts out, and then they transferred their ideas onto the same categories on the board at the front of the classroom. The class also discussed each of the categories and came to an overall consensus for each area. At the conclusion of the
activity, the class had developed very clear expectations for how good group members should behave. They had also defined the kinds of actions and attitudes that they did not want to see from their peers. Finally, the students also determined how their teacher should play a role in their learning and what kind of support they wanted. These ideas were then taken from the board and put on large butcher paper posters and hung around the classroom as a constant visual reminder for the students.

The ideas that were constructed from the discussion were also transferred onto a group work contract (see appendix). This contract was signed by each of the students, acknowledging an understanding of the expectations, as well as the potential consequences for not adhering to the guidelines prescribed by the class. Both the students and their parents signed these contracts. Each contract was photocopied and returned to the students, who kept them with their materials as another reminder of their promise to be effective and supportive group members throughout the upcoming project. Every single student that participated in the implementation returned their form, and once they had been photocopied and passed back, the students were asked to write a short reflection about the purpose of the contract. All of the students reported that they felt the contract as a good reminder for them about what they were supposed to be doing in their groups. They liked having the document to refer back to if they felt like one of their group members were not doing his/her share of the work. They specifically indicated that they found the role of the teacher element to be helpful. Because the dynamics of the classroom changed for the purpose of the curriculum implementation, the students appreciated the clear definition of roles and
responsibilities. Reducing the role of the teacher was, for many students, uncomfortable at first, but later a great exercise in problem solving and group cooperation.

Once the students had been placed into their groups, they began working on their first tasks. As they worked through their assignment, they were also taking note of the kinds of jobs they were taking on. Their own observations, coupled with my recommendations helped the class create job descriptions for the different roles students within the groups would play. By creating and drafting specific roles and expectations, the students would know what their tasks were each day, and what they were responsible for completing. Each group was to assign a “reporter,” whose job it was to share topics that the group discussed among themselves during class discussions. The groups also had a “recorder,” who was in charge of taking notes during discussion and filling out any group-based assignments. The “Organizer” was in charge of delegating the tasks for the day and making sure all the group members had their necessary supplies (novels, paper, etc.). This student also was the individual responsible for physically turning in assignments each day. Each group’s “Task Manager” oversaw the work that was being completed, ensuring that things would be completed on time and that the group members were on task and working. The student in this role was also in charge of making sure all students knew what they were supposed to be work on, so that there would not be any excuse for off task activities. The final role in the group, and one that could be split among multiple students in larger groups, was the “Researcher”. This student supported all the other members of
the group in their tasks by using the resources provided to check answers, look up
information and provide background and context when necessary. The roles in the
groups were not set—they changed frequently, as it is important for students to engage
in all capacities. Depending on what the class was working on, the roles may change
daily or weekly. Each student kept a description of each role with his or her copy of
the group work contract. The students reported that having specifically defined roles
helped them stay on task during work time. The students also said that the roles helped
them decide how to approach each of the assignments and how to delegate the tasks
involved.

Finally, as the last pre-implementation activity, the students were asked to
complete a journal entry. This journal asked students to discuss their initial feelings
about working in groups. They were asked to consider the guidelines the class had
created and what they thought about the project that was about to begin. It also
provided students with an opportunity to present any reservations, questions or
concerns about the new curriculum that would begin in the next class meeting. There
were three students who were adamantly opposed to the new class structure, but the
rest of the students involved in the implementation all indicated that they were looking
forward to the new approach. The majority of the students highlighted the social
interaction that the collaborative environment promised as the element that they were
most looking forward to.

In addition to these activities, the students also assisted in the development of a
task-assignment worksheet. With the roles that the students previously defined in
mind, I created an assignment sheet that outlined which student in each group would be completed which tasks. This worksheet was then used any time there was a group assignment that required participation and input from all of the members of the group. These worksheets were used throughout the implementation of the curriculum. The students also recognized this tool as another successful strategy in keeping them focused and on task.

**Pre-Reading**

The first week of the implementation was structured slightly differently than the weeks that would follow. Prior to reading the novel, the students completed several activities that prepared them for reading. They worked through biographical information activities about the author and engaged in many discussions that revolved around how the author’s life could have impacted his writing.

Stemming from the initial selection of the novel, the first activity that the students completed was an author study. They were provided with several biographical articles about the author of the novel, Victor Martinez, as well as book reviews and literary analyses and asked to synthesize the information. The students worked within their groups to complete a worksheet that helped them familiarize themselves with the author of the story, understanding his background, personal history and upbringing that influenced the story that they would be reading. As the students uncovered facts about the author, the class discussed the impact each significant piece of information could influence the writer’s story.
After completing the author study, the students were introduced to the first writing style that they would be studying. They were guided through a PowerPoint presentation that provided the styles and key features of the writing (see appendix for example). The teacher-lead instruction provided examples, strategies and chances for individual practice of key skills as well. Following the lecture, the students were presented with a scaffolded worksheet that helped them begin to practice the skills associated with the writing style. The guided worksheet supported the students, as they attempted a new style of writing and pulled ideas from their group discussions. As this was a new process for the class, many students reported that the first writing assignment was the most difficult. Once they were used to the new structure of assignments, though, the students fell into a routine and felt much more capable of completing their writing tasks.

The students were each instructed to select information about the author they found interesting from the provided materials and begin using it to complete the worksheet they were given. The students initially set out on this task on their own. Their choices varied from Martinez’s familiar history, to his written works, to his personal life. Once the majority of students had begun filling in the worksheet, they were instructed to share what they had done so far in their groups. If it became apparent that groups were struggling, then the teacher asked each group share out different ideas. At the conclusion of the work time, each group was asked to provide examples of the work they completed, which was then compiled into a model assignment that all of the students could look at. This helped the students to better
understand what was expected and provided a guide for them to follow. The students were then given additional time to work within their groups to ensure that everyone was able to complete the assignment. By giving students access to additional resources (one another), their learning was supported and they were allowed to explore new ideas in a low-risk environment. The groups reported that they enjoyed working together on small projects before doing discussions with the class because they could make sure that they understood the concepts and lessons before they had to share their thoughts with all of their peers.

After completing the scaffolded assignment, the students were asked to evaluate their performance, as well as the performance of their peers. They provided feedback on the participation, work ethic and attitude of each member of their group. They were also asked to describe the tasks that they completed for the project and what each of the members of their group did as well. Students largely reported that their first tasks with their group were positive experiences. Many were challenged by the idea of working with new people, but after working together their comfort levels increased.

The next task for the first week required the students to use some of their inference skills. They were provided with a list of chapter titles for the book. Working within their groups, they were to make brief (two to three sentences) predictions about what each chapter of the book might be about. At the conclusion of this, they were then to make a brief inference about what the book may be about, based on the chapter titles and their predictions. They were required to come up with explanations that the
whole group agreed upon and felt that they could support with what background information they had about the novel’s author. Each group shared their thoughts about one to three of the chapter titles. In conclusion, the class collectively wrote a paragraph that predicted what the novel was likely to be about. Each group contributed one sentence to the overall class paragraph. While the class composition was not perfectly fluid, the students were able to structure an effective paragraph that communicated the general goal of the assignment. The students recognized that the class paragraph was not perfect without revision and each group went back and revised the paragraph, using their own information, to finalize the writing. The students wrote in their journals that seeing the class composition helped them be able to write their own effective paragraph. They were able to see the process modeled for them and apply it to the tasks that they had to complete.

Finally, to conclude the week, the students completed their first quiz (see appendix). The quiz covered basic biographical information about the author. It also incorporated topics from the discussions that the class engaged in. In the creation of the quiz, key elements of discussion were considered. The questions also targeted information that the groups had indicated as necessary and important for their understanding of the novel. Each student completed the quiz individually. The quiz scores for each group were averaged and every student in the group received the average score. All students were given their quizzes back so that they could see how their score impacted the group’s overall performance. All groups scored in the 85 to 95 percent range on the quiz. While some students did do significantly better than
others in their groups, the students were able to see how much a low (or high) score could impact the group’s score overall. The first round of quizzes was a clear demonstration that the collaborative environment was helping many students who usually struggled, as no student scored lower than a 70 percent on the quiz.

**During Reading**

The second week of the implementation marked the actual beginning of reading. As they read, they were also presented with reading comprehension questions for that chapter. The groups worked through the questions as they read the chapter. The reading was initiated with the whole class, but once a few pages had been read, the groups were unleashed to finish the reading on their own. During this time, groups were monitored to make sure that students were sharing the responsibility of reading, working together on the questions and staying on task.

At the conclusion of this class period, the students worked to individually summarize the first chapter of reading. Each student wrote a paragraph that covered the first chapter of the reading, highlighting key characters, important facts and general impressions about the novel. They shared their summaries with their group members and were able to make any changes or additions to their own summaries, based on their discussions. Each group then picked one summary that they felt was the strongest, and the best summaries were shared out with the class. The summaries that were chosen by the group were, surprisingly, not from students who were typically willing to share their thoughts with the class in large discussion. But the added step of small-group discussion prior to whole class talk helped students feel more comfortable
sharing what they had completed, and they had the added endorsement of their peers to bolster their confidence.

After the summaries were discussed, the students reviewed their reading comprehension questions. They also previewed the questions for the next chapter of reading. Working in their small groups, the students looked over the questions and made predictions about what they would be reading next. They had an opportunity to ask any questions that they may have had, and then they began the reading. The students took turns within their groups reading out loud with their peers.

As groups finished with their reading of the second chapter of the novel, they were instructed to be discussing some of the controversial themes that had already started to emerge in the story (racism, classism, immigration, poverty, physical and substance abuse). They were asked to make a list of the different types of problems that the characters had faced and discuss their thoughts about each. Each group compiled a list of topics and discussed each among themselves. They then shared the topic they felt the most passionately about with the class. Eight of the groups chose to discuss immigration and racism, while four addressed substance abuse. Two more groups talked about domestic violence and the remaining two groups focused on classism and poverty.

Based on the topics that were selected by the students, the class brainstormed a list of social and personal issues that were taking place in the novel. Students were able to voice their opinions, ask questions and engage in debate about the varying topics. Many students were able to share first-hand experiences about racism, poverty
and immigration. Their candid responses helped their peers see a new perspective on many of the issues. The class was also given the opportunity to ask anonymous questions (written on scratch paper and put in a box) about any of the topics, in case the students didn’t feel comfortable addressing sensitive subjects directly. Both of these venues for discussion facilitated strong debate, with the students using both their own experiences and examples from the novel to support their beliefs. These discussions lead into the next writing lesson, which focused on persuasion. The students were presented with a PowerPoint presentation and scaffolded worksheets that were similar to the ones they had completed the previous week.

Spring boarding from the discussions that they engaged in, the students selected a controversial issue they wanted to examine further. The topics were generated from the content of the novel and the discussion in the classroom. The topics that the students focused on were immigration, poverty and domestic violence. The students took their topics and developed arguments that they would piece together into a persuasive writing sample. Each student worked on this assignment individually. Due to the short nature of the commentary piece, the students completed this over two class periods. In the second class period, they shared their writing with their peers and got edits and feedback. The students were able to provide each other with grammar and spelling edits, as well as providing feedback on the examples and arguments. The students reported that having another student read a draft of their writing and provide suggestions for improvement helped them feel more prepared to write and defend their final draft.
They then took the piece home and polished it, bringing it back on the third class meeting in its “final draft” form. As a conclusion to this component of the implementation, the students broke into small groups, based on the topics they chose. They then had small-group discussions about what they included in their writing assignments. This gave them a chance to exercise the skills they had been practicing and also encouraged them to interact with other students in the class, instead of just those in their assigned groups.

Also over the course of these class meetings, the students read the third chapter of the novel independently. This allowed additional time for some students who needed help with their writing or wanted more opportunities for discussions. The groups were responsible for engaging in conversations among their peers and completing the reading comprehension questions for the chapter.

The last activity that the students completed during this week of study was a reflective journaling prompt. They were asked to reflect on both the content of the novel and the topics that were being discussed, as well as the new structure of the class and how their group was working together. This was an opportunity for the students to voice any concerns or share their thoughts about the group work and collaborative expectations. They were also expected to comment on their personal performance, in addition to the performance of their peers. Most students recognized that the new structure of the class was encouraging them to write, read and participate more. While some students mentioned a dislike for the added discussion expectations, most of the class reported an overall approval and desire to continue with the new class structure.
The next four weeks of the novel study were carried out in this same manner. The students would read two to three chapters per week, using the content of the novel to inspire their writing for that section. Each week would focus on a different style of writing, with a PowerPoint notes presentation and scaffolded worksheet to accompany the lesson. This concept would be presented early in the week and then practiced and polished over the course of the class meetings. The students would begin their work on the writings individually and then collaborate with their peers to complete their assignments as well as compile their work into a group composition. Each week also included a series of reading comprehension and discussion questions that students worked on in their groups. The final activity of each week was a quiz that focused on reading comprehension as well as the writing skills that were focused on for the week. Some of these quizzes were graded on an individual basis and other times they were scored on an average. The students also finished out their week by writing reflections on the completion of the assignments and the environment and working habits of their group.

**Culminating Activities**

In order to prepare for the upcoming final exam, each group was responsible for compiling a study guide that would be distributed to other students. Each group was responsible for going back to each chapter of the novel and writing a series of multiple-choice questions that would test the reader’s understanding of the novel. Each group turned in proposed study questions for every chapter and they were then compiled into a comprehensive study guide that was given to every student. The
students were informed that their final exam would include questions from the study
guides that they had written, so they would be able to prepare for the test.

Drawing from the student study guides, quizzes and reading comprehension
questions the final exam was created in a multiple-choice format (see appendix). The
students were given the span of a weekend to prepare for the test and study and when
they returned to class the following week, they took the test individually. Once the
tests were scored, they were returned to the students.

When students received their tests back, they were asked to write a reflection
about how they thought they performed. Many students scored much better on the
exam than they had on previous tests, and they were asked to explain the difference.
Students who did not do as well as they expected were ask to discuss this as well. The
students who performed better than they had previously recognized the change in their
own attitudes about learning. They mentioned that the assistance of their peers made
them more willing to put in additional effort to be successful on the test. The
knowledge that other students had demonstrated a concern for their success helped
students who may have previously blown off an exam try harder. For students who
faltered, and did not score as well as they usually did, they recognized several factors
that may have influenced their results. These students noted that they did not study for
this test in the same ways that they typically did; they deviated from their regular
study habits. They also indicated that they occasionally focused on the success of their
peers, rather than their own understanding of certain concepts. These students, overall,
though, felt that if they had studied appropriately, they would have been more successful on the test.

Following the journal assignment, the students were given the opportunity to work with their groups to make corrections on their test. If they got an answer wrong, they were allowed to correct it and explain why their first answer was wrong, in order to receive partial credit. This final activity was a chance for the groups to come together to support one another and help each individual achieve the highest score possible.

Each week of the implementation followed the same basic formula. The students would review what had been done previously and be introduced to the writing concept for the week. While completing the reading, the groups would work through questions that focused on reading comprehension. The reading for the week would also directly relate to the writing for the week, so the students would also complete writing activities that were matched with the reading and focused on practicing the skills they had been introduced to. Discussion was used throughout the week to keep students engaged in the activities. Each week concluded with a quiz and the completion of a writing assignment.

**Post Implementation Activities**

Following the conclusion of the novel unit, the students were given time to debrief their collaborative learning experience. They not only had a chance to write reflections about their groups and how they worked with one another, but they were also invited to provide feedback for future use of the curriculum structure. Many students
suggested allowing more time for community-establishing activities, like ice breakers and team building games. Students craved the opportunity to get to know each other outside of the academic context—they felt that being comfortable with each other made it easier for them to learn from one another. The students reported that their input, involvement and roles in the creation of materials, expectations and topics for discussion made this novel unit of study more interesting than other units the class and conducted over the course of the year.

Additionally, the students filled out an exit survey (see appendix) that addressed many of the same questions as their initial survey. The students also critiqued the work of their peers and then role of the teacher on the survey.

**Modifications to Implementation**

Over the course of the implementation, there were minor changes to the classroom make up in both of the classes. Two students were withdrawn from the school, and as a result their groups had to be collapsed and recombined. In order to do this, I had to go back to the original surveys and sociogram to place students appropriately and try to make an effective group.

There was one group that did not function effectively, despite the efforts made to have a strong, collaborative structure. A group of four was not functioning, not participating and choosing not to complete work. I was forced to intervene and dissolve the group, placing one of the students in each of the remaining groups. Shortly after this, one of the students was suspended from school and did not return to class.
Over the course of the curriculum implementation, there were times when the students were unsure about how to complete writing assignments or what kind of final product was expected from them. When these challenges presented themselves, I brought the class back together and as a group we talked through the problems the students were facing. Initially, I posed the question to the class to see if other groups were capable of offering responses. In many cases, this was effective at resolving the issue. If there were not any solutions presented by the students, I would attempt to pinpoint specific elements of the task that the students were finding troublesome. By doing this, we were often able to narrow down the struggle to a simple step or component and address that, and then the students were able to move on. For example, during the persuasive writing exercises, many students struggled to determine if their examples were strong enough. By having the students share their examples with the whole class, the students could offer feedback to one another to help support or improve their arguments.

I found that, overall, when the students first had time to attempt skills on their own, then work collaboratively with their group members that they were then more likely to share their products with the class. I also found that drawing strong portions from each group’s work to compile into a sample composition was very helpful. This gave students a model to follow and it also validated the work that they were doing. Both of these actions increased the motivation levels and made the students feel like their work was valuable.
Occasionally, there were instances when there was not enough class time for the students to complete all of their reading comprehension questions. When this became an issue (three different occasions), the class discussed each of the questions. The students worked within their small groups to discuss the questions they were provided with and then one or two groups would share their responses. This ensured that the students still got the important information that they needed, but helped keep the curriculum within the time constraints. For those chapters, the students were still able to ask questions and clarify their understanding of the material, but they did not turn in completed chapter questions—each group simply turned in what they had completed. They were still quizzed on the material in the same fashion as the other chapters.

To successfully use this curriculum, there are a number of recommendations that can be offered. From time management, to classroom management to community facilitation, there are a number of skills that teachers should feel comfortable with before taking this kind of structural change in the classroom.

The nature of this curriculum forces the teacher to be actively seeking out materials, based on student interest and novel content. In order to effectively use this type of model, it is integral that a teacher is prepared and willing to do the extra work necessary to support students. The inclusion of materials that students understand, can relate to and identify with is key in fostering and maintaining high levels of engagement. It is recommended that teachers who use this model do so with a novel or
unit they are familiar with teaching, so that they have a strong understand of the contents and can more readily find materials to supplement with.

Additionally, managing the structure of this curriculum is challenging if the teacher does not have strong classroom management skills. The teacher needs to be able to manage the classroom without having to constantly be in charge. The classroom needs to be well managed enough that control and direction can be turned over to the students for discussion, brainstorming and reflection. If a teacher does not have the authority the classroom to make these activities function effectively, many elements of the curriculum will not work.

Conclusion

The success of this curriculum hinges on the environment within the classroom. In order for students to feel comfortable working together, sharing their ideas and supporting one another, a strong sense of community needs to be established. This sense of community is the most powerful element that the model course offered that may be difficult to replicate in another course. If teachers are willing to take the time and put in the effort to engage in community building activities, facilitate group-learning experiences and support the goals of collaboration in the classroom, a community of learners can flourish. This implementation demonstrated that a collaborative environment can be utilized in any setting and garner results.
VII. EVALUATION OF COLLABORATION IN ACTION

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of *Collaboration In Action*, data were collected in a number of ways. The primary method of data collection was observation. These observations were made by both the teacher and outside observers. Both the MySchool High School principal, as well as a Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) provider visited the class during implementation and provided observation notes and commentary. Along this same vein, students also wrote reflections and evaluated themselves and their peers. These reflections were also used as sources of evidence. Student quiz scores generated quantitative evidence and return rates on assignments and projects provided numeric feedback as well. There were several comparisons made between the outcomes of projects and assignments associated with *Collaboration In Action* and previous novel units, which were conducted with the students working individually. The most telling and powerful evidence, though, were the candid student journals and evaluations of themselves and their peers. The data collected during this implementation helped to address the essential research question, “What impact does a collaborative learning environment have on student engagement?”

**Data Sources and Analysis**

In the pre-implementation stage, the students were given surveys (see appendix) that asked them to rank and respond to their feelings associated with working in groups. I compiled the survey results and used them to help place the
students in groups. These responses helped to create a base, or starting point, for the students’ feelings about working collaboratively. They also answered questions about motivation that were analyzed in the same fashion. The data indicated that most students enjoyed working collaboratively, but were not especially more or less motivated by a group-work setting. Most students favored working in groups because they felt that there was a decreased workload and there was less individual responsibility associated with projects (see figure 4).

Figure 4: Group work motivation.
Students also completed an open-ended journal that asked them to discuss their feelings about working with their peers. They were asked to share any concerns, challenges or fears that they had about working collaboratively. The data that this activity provided was reviewed and then sorted by students who favored group work, those who did not and those who were indifferent. This data was also used in the grouping strategy to help formulate effective groups for the project. It was important to create balanced groups, with students who had indicated that they enjoyed group work and those that did not working together. By comparing the students feelings about working with their peers, I was able to create groups that were set up to be effective. These groups were balanced by both language skill, academic ability and willingness to work with peers.

During pre-implementation activities, the students were also observed. Notes were taken that recorded who the students chose to work with, who they got along with, where there appeared to be tension and which students did not get actively involved in the projects. Additionally, notes were also taken that demonstrated which students assumed leadership roles, which students contributed to the assignments and which students tried to disengage from the activity. This helped to create a sociogram (see appendix) that demonstrated the relationships at play within the classroom. The sociogram was then used to help in the grouping process so that the work clusters that the students were placed in would be well balanced. Despite this attempt, there was one group that was dissolved shortly after the onset of the implementation. This
grouping, though it was balanced by skill and workability, did not function cohesively. The students were then disbanded and placed into other groups in the class.

The combination of these data sources helped to inform the decisions that were made about grouping the students together for their projects. Based on the variety of information collected, the students were sorted into groups that represented full ranges of academic skills, as well as leadership and social skills. Students who were highly motivated were put into groups that had students with lower levels of motivation, in attempt to encourage lower-functioning students to participate and engage in class activities.

Once the implementation of Collaboration in Action began, the students began generating a variety of sources of data that could be analyzed. Opportunities for observation were also abundant once the project began. As the project progressed, student work and group projects also offered even greater sources of data that could be analyzed for a wide range of purposes.

**Data Sources**

Each source of data provided valuable information for evaluating the effectiveness of Collaboration in Action. These sources were analyzed in a variety of ways to gleam important findings from the student work and interactions generated by this unit. Each element of the data set provided insight into the kind of impact that the collaborative environment had on the students’ engagement in class.

The student responses that have been included in this section have been taken
verbatim from student interviews and journals. Details regarding many students’ personal backgrounds, social interactions and lives outside of school were gathered through conversations with school counselors, other teachers, conversations with parents or guardians or were shared by the student themselves. Student information in this section was left unedited in this section in order to preserve the students’ voice and opinion.

**Surveys**

Prior to the onset of the unit, the students filled out the Group Work Survey (see appendix) that questioned their feelings about working in groups with their peers. This data was helpful in structuring the groups for the activity, as it made it possible to create well-balanced groups with students who both enjoyed and shied away from group work. The students were asked to use a number scale to rate their responses, but they also had space to explain their answers. The backside of the survey had open-ended questions for the students to reflect on. These questions were used to gauge students’ feelings about working with their peers, as well as their own motivations and work ethic (see appendix). At the conclusion of the project, the students completed the front side of the survey again. The second side of the survey was adapted to allow the students to reflect on the implementation process and their individual learning.

**Journals**

The students completed journal entries almost daily. These provided opportunities for reflection on the novel itself, but also on the implementation project.
itself. The students were frequently asked to reflect on and discuss the way that their groups were working or how they were engaging with their peers. These responses presented data that could be used to qualify the effectiveness of the implementation, especially when paired with other sources of analysis. The journal entries were examined to both test the reading comprehension of the students as well as their motivation, engagement and participation in the implementation activities. For example, the following journal prompt was given to the students:

*Discuss how your group is working together. Do you feel like you are learning more while working in a group, or did you learn more when working alone? Please provide examples.*

A student responded to this prompt by writing,

> My group gets along really good. We weren’t friends before, and now we like to talk about stuff other than just the book. I think that the group is better for me because I feel like I can ask them questions when we are working and when I work by myself, I don’t like to ask questions. When Pedi was playing with the gun, I wasn’t sure if she got hurt or not. When I asked my group, they told me that the gun went off, but Pedi didn’t get hurt. If I had read that by myself, I wouldn’t have asked for help on it in class. I don’t want the whole class to think I have dumb questions. I don’t mind asking my group because I feel like they are my friends and they won’t be mean to me. –Steven J., English 9 Student

This type of response demonstrated a number of things. The student recognized the effectiveness of the implementation, commenting that he feels more comfortable working with his group than on his own. He also noted that his group provided a safe environment in which he could ask questions, which demonstrates he was engaged in the reading and motivated to understand it. His example and
discussion of the novel content also shows that he was comprehending what he read and was able to achieve solid understanding with the help of his group members.

While some students responded very positively to the collaborative structure, not all students were in favor of the new structure, despite the impact they felt it had on their learning.

My group is ok, I guess. I don’t really know them that good yet, but they seem all right. I really don’t want to be in a group. It’s allot better when I do stuff by myself because if I screw up its my own fault. I know that the group helps me, but I’d still work alone if you would let me because that’s what I want to do. –Cesar P., English 9 Student

This student acknowledged that there was benefit in the group structure, but expressed a dislike in sharing responsibility with his peers. Even though he was able to recognize that working with other students may benefit him, he was very apprehensive to fully commit to group tasks. While many students enjoyed the shared responsibility of the group set up, other students were turned off by it, either not wanting to claim work they didn’t feel was fully theirs or not wanting to give credit to other students. As the unit progressed, many of the apprehensive students became more comfortable with the set up and were more willing to engage with their peers.

Observations

Observations were made by both the teacher and outside observers. These provided for both participant-style observations, as well as unbiased outsider notes. The teacher was able to focus on certain aspects of the students’ interactions, while the outsider could get an untainted, whole-group picture of the class at work. The site principal was able to take candid notes during a short observation, focusing on the
students’ engagement in the lesson they were working on. The BTSA provider was able to take detailed, annotated notes that cataloged the interactions of the entire class (with each other and the teacher) during two separate lessons.

During teacher observations, student interactions were examined. Conversations were noted, checking for levels of on-task talk and behavior and judging the effectiveness of the grouping structures. Effective groups would be largely on-task, with their discussions centering on the work to be completed. Additionally, efficient groups would have completed their task sheets, designating the jobs that each student in the group would be fulfilling for the given assignment. The teacher would also be taking note of the level of engagement of students, especially those who tended to struggle in class. Engaged students would be working, sitting up straight and interacting with his or her peers. Disengaged students typically had their heads down or did not have the materials out that they needed to complete their work. In order to gauge the student behaviors, I developed a rubric for analysis (See Table 1).

Students were observed multiple times over the course of a class period, in order to ensure that behaviors that were observed were consistent. Students who demonstrated engagement were clearly connected to the assigned tasks and working effectively with their groups. Because it was possible for students to interact with out actually participating or collaborating, special care was taken to note the differences in the student actions. Some students could engage in off topic talk with their peers and not contribute anything to the assignment. Others were able to juggle some
socialization with task completion.

Table 1: Student Behaviors Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Not Present</td>
<td>Sitting up, awake</td>
<td>Completing necessary tasks</td>
<td>Completing tasks and discussing work</td>
<td>Tasks finished, discussing topics with peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction</td>
<td>Not Present</td>
<td>Talk to group (off task)</td>
<td>Talking to group (on task)</td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>Leading discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Not Present</td>
<td>Asking questions</td>
<td>Including group feedback in work</td>
<td>Utilizing group members to complete tasks</td>
<td>Including group feedback in each task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Not Present</td>
<td>Talks to group only</td>
<td>1-2 comments/questions to class</td>
<td>3-4 comments/questions to class</td>
<td>5 +/-introducing new topic in class discussion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The observations conducted by the outsiders attempted to look at the whole picture of the classroom. The observer was taking note of the teacher’s interaction with the students, the classroom environment and how the students were working in their groups. These observers were not given any direction as far as what to look for, but their notes centered around the levels of participation, on and off task behaviors in students and the teacher’s role in the classroom. These observations helped paint a picture of the type of classroom environment that was being developed, as well as the roles that all the important parties played in it.

Outside observations that took place on three separate occasions during implementations indicated that the teacher had to redirect student behavior back to the assigned tasks three times during group work periods (over a 90 minute observation).
Groups that were working without teacher interaction were largely on-task, with only two students not participating in group discussion (over the same 90 minute observation). Students were also observed coaching one another, encouraging discussion and facilitating answer-seeking. Every group had at least one student who was effectively leading his or her peers towards the completion of the assigned tasks.

**Findings**

The implementation of *Collaboration In Action* yielded a variety of findings. In response to the goals that were outlined at the onset of this project, there were several conclusions drawn. It was determined that collaborative learning has a direct impact on student engagement in the classroom. Some of the data gathered was very telling, while other pieces of research mirrored the notions held before the project began.

**Goal 1: Establish a collaborative learning community.**

In order to garner the kinds of outcomes in the English classroom that were experienced in the journalism classroom, it was important to create a sense of community in the classroom. The students needed to feel like they had a role in the classroom and that their work was important to everyone else present. Requiring the students to become dependant on one another was key in establishing this collaborative learning environment.

**Finding One: Structured collaboration facilitates a sense of community and responsibility.**

While the students initially struggled with the idea of working in groups and
being required to rely on the performance of their peers, they eventually became comfortable with the concept. After roles were outlined, established and maintained, the students accepted the change in structure and were able to flourish in it. Data from the pre and post implementation surveys demonstrates a drastic change in the students’ attitudes about working with their peers. Many students initially indicated that they liked group work, but they didn’t really trust their peers to complete work on. Many students who were initially apprehensive about the group structure of the class became comfortable enough to trust and collaborate with their peers by the end of the unit. Even students who would typically choose to work alone began to engage with their groups without prompting by the end of the six-week cycle. In the beginning, the majority of students recognized a concern about relying on their group members to get work done. By the end of the project, though, not a single student indicated that he or she thought that the other class members would not get work done (see Figure 5). This demonstrates a clear shift in the way that students felt about one another and their willingness to rely on each other. Early on in the implementation, students were apprehensive and doubtful of their peers’ ability. By the end of the novel unit, the students had established enough trust and shared responsibility that they no longer doubted their fellow students’ ability or willingness to complete assigned tasks.
In addition to the survey findings, the journal entries that the students completed also indicated an increase in the trust among students. At the onset of the project, 54% of the students voiced a concern about their grades being tied to the other members of their group and their ability to complete work. By the end of the unit, their mistrust of their peers decreased—only 12% of students said they still had misgivings about how their peers’ work would impact their grade. Ingrid, a student who typically earned Bs and scored in the Advanced range on the CSTs, wrote in her journal that,

When we first started this project I was really worried because I felt like there were a lot of dumb people and goof offs in my group. They were not people I wanted to work with at all. It was really hard to get them to work at first, but once we all made friends it was easier. It seemed like even the boys who didn’t care about their grade cared more once we were, like, friends and stuff. In the end, we all did the work because we didn’t want all of us to get a bad grade just because one person was lazy. –Ingrid P., English 9 Student
As the project progressed, the students became increasingly comfortable with their group members. While they may have initially felt unsure about asking questions of their peers or expecting someone else to help them get work done, they saw their fellow students as resources by the end of the project. They not only knew that they could turn to someone else in their group for help, but they preferred that method over asking the teacher for help directly. This finding is most effectively demonstrated through the experiences of Sergio. The information provided about Sergio was gathered through conversations with the student, his counselor and guardians. His journals were also used to provide data for this section.

*Sergio’s Story*

In the Fall semester, Sergio failed ninth grade English with a 25 percent F. While he was rarely absent, he did not complete his in class or homework assignments. He would frequently leave his materials behind in the classroom, instead of taking them home or storing them in his locker. While he would come to class with paper and pencils each day, he always had to be prompted to get them out and begin working. Rather than seeking out assistance during class time, Sergio would often draw or sleep during lessons and work time. He was also often off-task and would look for any opportunity to distract those around him. Sergio scored in the Far Below Basic category on the CSTs and is a struggling English-language learner. Both of his parents have been deported to Mexico. His older brother, who is nineteen and has two small children of his own, is raising Sergio. Sergio spends his time outside of school commuting back and forth from Tijuana to visit his parents and helping his brother
take care of his children. Early in the Spring semester, Sergio indicated that he simply
didn’t see himself as a “school person” and was essentially biding his time until he
was old enough to drop out and get a full-time job. His brother had initially attempted
to intervene and help Sergio be successful in the Fall, but his efforts died out long
before the semester break.

When the implementation began, Sergio did not choose a “buddy” to work with. He indicated that he preferred to work alone. He was added to a group of four, the other members of which were female. Two of the girls in his group were “A” type students—they completed their work on time, engaged in discussion and were motivated to learn. They were relatively shy and were not always willing to participate in group discussions, but worked well in smaller groups. The other two girls struggled academically and often had challenges when it came to academic language. Both girls, though, had adequate academic and English language skills and put in the extra effort to complete their work to the best of their ability. The latter two girls were also very social and willing to participate in class discussions, even though they often had a hard time effectively articulating what they wanted to say. Initial observations showed Sergio disconnected from his group—he did not talk to the other students, he did not complete his assignments and he appeared to have shut down completely. Following the class discussion about effective group work, though, Sergio started to come around. After the groups completed many “ice breaker” style activities, Sergio began to interact with the girls in his group. In response to a free-write in his journal, Sergio wrote,
I really hated this project when it started. I thought it was really stupid and I didn’t want to do it. I don’t normally like to work in groups because I always get put in the stupid group. This time I got the girl group. I like being in the girl group. They help me and they don’t make me feel like I’m dumb when I don’t understand stuff. I really like working with them and I feel like they won’t laugh at me if I don’t get something. I like to ask them questions better than asking Ms. Young or the class. That way if my question isn’t good they don’t think I’m not smart. They are really good at helping me and they don’t seem angry when I ask them a lot of stuff, even when I have to ask stuff twice.
—Sergio A., English 9 student

Sergio’s candid reflection, as well as his improved grade, demonstrate the powerful impact a comfortable environment can have on a student’s learning. While Sergio originally felt challenged and chose to disconnect from the classroom, the comfortable environment he was able to forge within his group helped him create a small community in which he felt like he could ask for help and not feel dumb. He was able to rely on his peers for assistance when he didn’t understand the material and saw them as valuable resources in his learning process. By the end of the unit, Sergio had completed 86 percent of all of the individual assignments and passed all but one of the reading quizzes. He scored a 77 percent on the final exam, which was a marked improvement from his previous tests. On similar units, Sergio had scored in the F and D range on tests, typically choosing to leaving answers blank.

When Sergio wrote about his change in test scores, he said,

This test juss seemed easier. With the other ones, I didn’t kno answers so I didn’t care. Now I no the answer, or I felt like I kno enough to guess. And I didn’t want my group to think they didn’t help me good enough.

Not only did Sergio demonstrate an increased level of engagement, he also
showed that he valued the effort his peers had put into assisting him. He wanted to prove to his peers (and himself) that the work that had gone into the unit was well spent; he was invested in his small learning community. Sergio was observed to be focused and on task and was actively involved in group and class discussions over the course of the implementation.

**Goal One, Discussion**

Establishing community proved to be an integral part of the success in this implementation. Aside from Sergio, numerous other students recognized the sense of family, community, togetherness and unity that they felt within their groups. They recognized a sense of responsibility that they had to themselves and their peers to complete work and take their assignments seriously. Without this element, the students would only be motivated by their own needs. Increasing their reliance and dependence on one another not only gives them an additional motivating factor, but also a real-life experience that will prepare them for their roles after high school.

An average student, who rarely participated in large-group discussion or other classroom activities, recognized the change in the classroom environment and how it impacted her desire to be present in class. She was able to identify a personal change that she deemed to be a result of the classroom structure.

To be realz, Ms. Young, I use to ditch this class sometimes. Nothing personal or nothing, I just don’t really like English and stuff. I also don’t got a lot of friends in sixth per. so cuz of that sometimes I didn’t come. But this whole group thing worked pretty good. I made some new friends in my group, and when they seen me walking the wrong way outta the quad at lunch, they told me to come to class. At
first I thought they was just being goody goody, but then when we worked together in the class they made me feel like they really liked me being there. After that, I didn’t ditch no more. At least not your class.—Davianna D., English 9 student

**Goal 2: Increase engagement through authentic tasks.**

One of the biggest complaints that students make about school is that they feel the work that they do doesn’t really benefit or connect their to the lives outside of the classroom. One of the reasons journalism was deemed to be so successful was that the students saw their work go into print—they had an authentic task and they knew why they were completing their work and where they were heading with it. By creating assignments that were centered around the novel, but also connected to bigger issues beyond the classroom, the students who participated in the implementation had another dimension added to their work. They weren’t just writing an essay about a topic—through this project they were learning a writing style that they could use to write letters to the editor, persuasive pieces and they were voicing their personal opinions on social issues. In addition to this, they were doing their work in an environment that was scaffolded and supported their learning. Even though much of what they were doing was new to them, they had a structure to follow and peers to rely on that made the tasks more manageable and less intimidating.

Additionally, students were able to engage in meaningful discussion, based on the assigned tasks. The topics in the novel offered many opportunities for the class to address very real issues—from immigration, to domestic violence, to substance abuse. For many students, this was the first time they were in an environment where they
could comfortably discuss issues very closely related to their lives.

Finding Two: Authentic tasks paired with collaboration increase engagement.

Initially, the English students were going to compile all of their writings and work together to create a class newspaper. For the newspaper students, seeing their byline once a month them working hard. In the English class, the publishing element did not drive the students’ engagement. When the potential for publication was introduced to the students, many of them voiced concern and discomfort. Rather, it was found that assigning tasks that the students found value in, and allowing them the freedom to work with their peers was what drove their motivation (see Figure 6).

![Figure 6: Student motivation.](image)

When students were given the freedom to take control over their own learning experiences, they exhibited much greater gains in engagement levels. The students
were far more likely to participate in discussions about topics they were interested in or write compositions about their lives than they were to contribute to a class publication. The ability to share their thoughts, insight and opinions with their peers interested the students more than the possibility of publishing a class newspaper.

The students recognized, both on the evaluation surveys, and in their journal responses, that because they could see how their tasks related to things outside of the classroom, and because they could work with their peers, they tended to be more engaged in class.

I liked this project because we talked about real stuff. It wasn’t like another class where we come and we talk about molecules and I don’t care about molecules. We came here and we talked about real stuff. I didn’t really like the writing parts, but at least we were writing about real stuff. I liked that I got to talk about what I know from life and what I know from the book. It was cool that I could talk about the stuff we did in here when I was kicking it with my friends outside of school, too. That made this way cooler than molecules. –Erika R., English 9 Student

Other students, like Erika, noted the real-life application of the topics as key elements in their success. Because the students felt like they were working on something that had relevance in their day-to-day lives, they were more willing to participate, more interested in the topics and found the material engaging. One student in particular, named Luis, typically did not complete work or other assignments, but he identified the real-life application of his tasks as the most important element of the implementation.

**Luis’s story**

Luis struggled both academically and behaviorally in school. His GPA for the first semester was a 0.0; he did not pass a single one of his classes. He found little
value in anything that academics had to offer him and was often truant from school. When Luis was present, he was often a distraction in the classroom. In order to manage his behavior, he was often seated separate from other students so that he would not distract them from their tasks. Despite his lack of dedication to his academics, Luis scored the Proficient range on the CSTs. He was redesignated in the English Language Learners program when he was in the seventh grade; he has been considered English proficient for 2 full years. Both of Luis’s parents completed their first years of high school in Mexico, but neither one graduated. They both work full time jobs for minimum wage in Hometown.

Luis elected to work with another student, Gregory, who had similar struggles. Luis and Gregory were placed in a group of six. The other twosomes in the group were students who were typically fairly high achieving and motivated. They were placed in this group to, hopefully, help balance their tendencies to act out and disrupt class. When the unit first began, Luis and Gregory were successful in their efforts to derail the learning of their peers. Their group was frequently off-task and did not complete the assignments for the first week of the unit. At the conclusion of the first week, two things happened. One—the group was issued a warning that if they did not begin to adhere to their contracts, their group would be disbanded and they would complete the work individually. Two—Gregory was expelled from school. Once the students were given a firm warning and Gregory was removed from the picture, things turned around. The group members began working together and Luis slowly came around to contributing to his group. His self-reflection explained this transition.
This project is stupid and I don’t like it. I don’t like having to write about everything and I think it is dumb. But my group won’t let me not do it so I gotta. The one thing that I do like is that we are talking about stuff that is real. We talked about jail and drugs and guys that hit on their wives. That’s real shit. And we get to talk about it and that’s kind of ok. I still think this is dumb, though. It’s better when we get to work on the stuff together and write about it, though. I guess my group is all right. They make me do my stuff and that’s dumb but they are ok people. I get that they don’t want to get a bad grade so I gotta do my stuff. I guess working more isn’t so bad cuz I’m not as bored and the stuff is pretty legit. –Luis R., English 9 Student

Luis’s candid evaluation of the project sheds light on his feelings about both school and the topics at hand. Even though he found little value in the project, he recognized that the work with his group and the relevant topics guided him towards completing his work. He may not have liked the writing components, but unlike assignments previously, he did them. Even though Luis’s group struggled at the beginning of the project, by the end they were able to successfully complete group and individual assignments. Their average group grade on quizzes was an 81%. This was similar to the average for the class as a whole, which was an 87 percent. Luis also demonstrated an improvement on his scores and return rate for assignments. In previous units, he typically turned in about half of the required work. For the implementation unit, he turned in more than 75 percent of the required assignments. Considering his attitude about school prior to the implementation, this change is noteworthy and clearly shows what kind of impact authentic activities and collaboration can have on a student’s willingness to work and engage in classroom activities.
Goal Two, Discussion

Luis and his group demonstrated both the success and shortcomings that lie within *Collaboration in Action*. While the collaborative environment can be a source of motivation and encouragement, if it is not structured properly it can be an outlet for off task behavior as well. Luis and his group were able to turn their behavior around and still garner the benefits of the implementation. The students recognized that the validity of their activities was one of the key factors that contributed to their willingness to work. They knew that when they came to class each day, they would be working on projects and discussing issues with their peers that really mattered in their lives. For these students, topics like immigration, drug abuse, gangs and violence were commonplace occurrences. Many of these students had personally dealt with one or more of these challenges, so incorporating them into the classroom, through a novel that addressed them as well, was integral in getting the students to buy in to the activities.

While the initial belief was held that a published product motivated students, the students in this implementation disproved this. The students had more apprehension and discomfort about the publication element of the class than they had excitement. The students were able to recognize and demonstrate that their motivating factors were the topics they could easily relate to and the opportunity to work with their peers on projects. The authentic topics brought issues to the table that the students didn’t often get the opportunity to talk about and the cooperative work created a safe environment in which they could engage in these discussions.
Goal 3: Create an environment that provides for increased engagement.

Even though the students in the implementation class represented a wide range of skills and abilities, many of them were identified as students at risk for school failure. They came from homes that were unstable, had a history of gang-related activity or problems acting out at school. Out of the 64 students involved in the implementation, 41 of them had a discipline record. Over the course of the implementation, several students were suspended or expelled for defiant, drug or violence related behavior. Ninth grade is often regarded as a pivotal year for students—they will either make it through high school because of their performance in ninth grade, or they will set themselves up to fail and potentially drop out of school all together. Many students struggle with the adjustment to the high school setting, the added responsibility and the challenges and demands of high school curriculum. MySchool has employed a specific ninth grade intervention program that targets students who are headed down a path for failure, based on their behaviors (both in and out of school), grades and attitudes. Thirty-three students involved in the implementation were identified by the ninth grade program as those needing intervention and additional assistance to be successful in high school. With this in mind, it became increasingly important to motivate and engage these students in the curriculum, hopefully demonstrating to them that school could be a helpful, beneficial place for them. Establishing an environment in which this could happen was a key goal of the implementation. Creating community among peers became crucial in the success of the implemented curriculum. Providing a place where students could feel
valued, important and safe would allow them to focus on the academic efforts and immerse themselves in the work they were presented with.

**Finding Three: Safe, comfortable environments increase student engagement.**

Many students who struggle in school often have problems because they don’t know how to be effective students. They may not have parents who are educated, or their parents may be absent entirely. Especially at MySchool, many students also face the additional challenge of language barriers, where their parents don’t speak enough English to effectively interact with their teachers, school officials or help with their nightly homework assignments. Additionally, many students who have a hard time in school are constantly faced with negative reinforcement for their poor behaviors. They get referrals, lectures and discipline. They learn to become defensive and hard, rather than being able to talk through their challenges or interact with their peers or teachers effectively (Marks, 2000). When students see school as an obstacle that impedes them, rather than a challenge experience that enriches them, they often struggle. When students fail to connect with their peers, teachers and school community, the likelihood that they will have academic and behavior problems increases (Marks, 2000).

The implementation of *Collaboration in Action* found that with these types of students especially, creating a comfortable and welcoming environment was key. Students who were typically more likely to shut down in a discussion often did so because they did not feel comfortable opening up. They often also felt inadequate
when compared to their higher-achieving peers. The sense of community and caring
and compassion that *Collaboration in Action* facilitates gave these students a safe
environment to share their thoughts.

Normally I don’t like to talk about what my parents do. I’m not
proud that my mom cleans people’s houses or that my dad can’t keep a
job. I don’t really like people knowing that my parents don’t speak good
English and that a lot of times I have to translate for them. I’m worried
that people will think I’m dumb because my parents aren’t educated.
When we started talking about Manny’s parents and their attitudes about
his school, I was really nervous. I didn’t want to talk at first. But first,
Erik in our group talked about his dad wanting him to drop out and
work. And Ashley talked about her mom telling her college was a waste.
It made me realize that if the other people in my group could share that
stuff, I could too. And I learned that people aren’t going to judge me
because of my parents. Ashley actually told me I should be proud to be
getting a better education than my mom and dad have, so I can help take
care of them later. –Teresa J., English 9 student

Students like Teresa would have normally clammed up during class
discussions about touchy subjects. But because of the smaller group settings, the
students had a sense of friendship and familiarity among their group members. This
made it easier for them to share personal experiences, speak their mind and ask
questions that might have otherwise been ignored. The small-group sharing made it
easier, in turn, for the students to share their feelings with the class as well. They could
test out what they wanted to say on their peers before they had to share openly with
the class. Having a chance to practice sharing their thoughts often made students more
willing to voice their opinion in a larger forum. They could also get feedback from
their peers before speaking in front of the class, which helped them feel both
supported and prepared.
Feeling comfortable in class also helped students share more openly. When they felt like they were supported, understood and heard, they were more likely to participate in class discussions and engage with their peers. In a journal entry, students were asked to rate their willingness to participate in a class discussion both before and after the implementation was completed. This data demonstrated that the environment of the implementation project increased the students’ willingness to engage in classroom discussions (See Figure 7).

Prior to the implementation, there were a handful of students that routinely shared their opinions in class, while most students chose to remain quiet. During and following the implementation, many more students volunteered to participate,
especially if they were given group-time to share beforehand.

Even students who typically shied away from participation entirely were more engaged during the implementation. Observations by both the teacher and outside observers noted that in all groups, all students were engaged in the activities for the majority of the class period. Engaged students were discussing the work with their peers, completing tasks and contributing to the group tasks. Students within groups prompted one another to stay on task and teacher intervention assisted other students who deviated from their tasks. A typically challenging student, Horatio, modeled the effective impact that the classroom environment can have on both a student’s motivation and engagement.

*Horatio’s story*

Horatio often split his class time between napping, talking during instruction or warming a seat in the assistant principal’s office. He was one infraction from being dropped from his English 9 class (based on the MySchool High School three-strikes policy) because of his constant off-task and disruptive behavior. He had been suspended from school in the Fall semester for drug possession and his subsequent absences contributed to his failing grade. Despite a clear lack of interest in school, Horatio’s CST scores ranked him in the advanced category. Of the 64 students involved in the implementation, Horatio had the third highest CST scores, and the highest scores of any male student in the classes. Both of Horatio’s parents are MySchool High School graduates and his family has lived in Hometown for several
generations. Outside of school, Horatio only speaks Spanish. His parents, both bilingual, only speak Spanish in their home and among their friends and family. Even though he demonstrates a clear mastery of English, he has not passed the CELDT examinations and is categorized as an L4 English Language Learner.

Horatio selected Daisy as his “buddy” for the grouping prior to the implementation. Daisy is a high-achieving student who often was willing to help other students with their work. She was frequently observed during class time helping both her group members and members in other groups. She and Horatio have gone to school together since they were in kindergarten and their friendship was apparent during the sociogram study. The other three members in their group were two boys and a girl. These other students were average students, who tended to participate in class but often struggled academically.

With Daisy’s persistence, assistance and encouragement, Horatio performed very differently during the implementation than he had previously. He attributed the change in his behavior to both the influence of his peers, but also to the small group setting. In an interview, Horatio said,

> I work better this way because it’s, like, easier. I can talk about the stuff we’re doing and ask Daisy questions and the other people in the group help, too. Before I’d ask Daisy for help sometimes, but not always. I didn’t know that there were other people in our class that knew the answers or would help me just to help me. I didn’t really think anyone cared, cause I didn’t really care about them. It’s sorta weird to think that, like, the other kids want to help me. –Horatio Y., English 9 student

Prior to the implementation, Horatio rarely turned in work. When he did, it was
often incomplete or completely incorrect. After the first quiz that the students took individually, they were asked to write a journal reflection about their score. Horatio shared the following:

I think this is the first time I’ve ever gotten a ‘good’ grade on something in school. I never really gave a crap before because I knew I’d do bad. But this time I knew I had my group to help me, so it made it kind of ok to try harder. –Horatio Y.

Horatio recognized that he didn’t have to complete his tasks alone; he was a member of a learning community that would support him. Initially, his efforts were most significant on group-related activities, but as the implementation progressed he also began to apply himself more in his individual tasks. At the culmination of the implementation, the students took a multiple-choice final exam over the contents of the novel. Horatio scored the highest on the test out of all the students.

“I knew I was doing better, because I listened more and stuff,” Horatio said in an interview. “The work just got easier, because I had my group. And I kind of got to a place where I didn’t need my group as much, but I liked knowing that they were there,” he said.

**Goal Three, Discussion**

The support that students can offer one another can be a determining factor in their successes. The students involved in this implementation responded well to the demands of a collaborative learning community by working with and helping one another. For students who typically quit when work got hard, *Collaboration in Action* provided an additional set of resources that they could use. Once certain levels of
comfort were achieved within the groups and within the classroom, the students were able to openly share their thoughts and feelings, without worrying about what their peers would think or if their ideas were going to be considered stupid.

Providing an environment where students can rely on each other, in addition to the teacher and other at school resources, gives an additionally building block for success. Especially in cases where students may be at risk for school failure, structured collaborative environments can provide the necessary assistance that these students may need but not be able to get elsewhere.

**Conclusion**

The six-week implementation of *Collaboration In Action* provided a number of insights. Group work and collaboration play an important role in a productive classroom environment, and when teachers are able to utilize these strategies, there are many opportunities for student success. While *Collaboration In Action* was inspired by the structures of a scholastic newsroom, the cooperative learning environment that unfolded proved to be effective in a core subject area classroom as well. The support that unfolds in a group setting gives students an opportunity to gain access to activities and materials that they may not have previously felt comfortable working with. The environment that is established in a collaborative classroom community gives students the comfort and encouragement they need to engage themselves fully in their tasks.

*Collaboration In Action* is not a flawless project. There are, undoubtedly, areas for improvement. The curriculum, though, achieved its overall goals, resulting in a
cooperative working and learning environment, where students were both motivated and engaged in the daily lessons. Students felt ownership over their projects and were connected to the material they were working with. They also created a sense of community among their group members, working effectively and relying on one another to finish projects.

**Summary and Discussion**

The overall goal of the *Collaboration in Action* project was to impact the level of and engagement in a standard ninth grade English classroom. By utilizing a group-work setting, the students were able to work with their peers while still achieving the learning goals of the course. Finding One demonstrated that structured collaboration provides a sense of community and responsibility among students. The implementations second finding showed that when students were given authentic tasks with collaborative expectations, both motivation and ownership in regards to these tasks increased. Finally, Finding Three made it clear that safe, comfortable environments have an effect on student engagement. Essentially, creating a community of learners in a classroom helps students gain comfort and encourages them to invest themselves in their tasks. Overall, Finding Three drives the success of a curriculum like *Collaboration in Action*.

Conducted alongside a novel study, *Collaboration in Action* proved to be an effective method for increasing both the levels of engagement and reading comprehension among lower-performing students. By grouping students in clusters and creating relationships within those clusters that required dependency on one
another, students felt additional responsibility for completing their tasks. Additionally, the cooperative structure of the class allowed for more student talk, discussion and processing time during the reading of the story. These factors all had an impact on the students’ learning.

_Collaboration in Action_ served to effectively engage students who would have, typically, performed in the D to F range on similar assignments. For students usually did most of their assignments and occasionally participated in class, the change in the curriculum and classroom structure had a minimal impact on their performance. Many of those students journaled that they enjoyed the added social element of the class, but their scores did not indicate a drastic impact on their learning. For students who were previously high achievers, the change in curriculum appeared to cause a decrease in their scores. While they felt the added pressure of ensuring that their group performed well, not all of the advanced students received the same caliber of scores on many of their assignments. Several students who did not score as well as they usually did on the final exam reflected on deviation from their regular study habits. These students pointed out that, due to the change in structure, they did not study the same way as they had for previous tests. They felt that because they had helped create the test, they didn’t need to study. To them, same amount of preparation was not needed for a student-created test as a teacher-created test would warrant. These students also noted that their desire to help their struggling group members also, in some instances, kept them from getting as much of their own work completed. But even when they were
helping their peers, the stronger students recognized that their interactions were beneficial to both students.

The structure of the *Collaboration in Action* model provides a basis from which teachers can impose their own design. Placing the students in groups, creating projects and assignments that require whole group participation and developing a cumulative project with a large-scale audience gives students a different experience than a traditional novel study. Their classroom experience becomes more than just a lecture with a teacher—they become invested in their work because their peers are counting on them. Additionally, students indicated that the new structure of the class made it easier for them to gain understanding of the novel and tasks because they were exposed to more resources during class time (their peers).

In order to increase the performance levels of struggling students, curricula like *Collaboration in Action* can be an effective tool. Approaching learning from a new perspective, introducing students to new practices and encouraging peers to work cooperatively can have powerful benefits for many students. Even though all students may not see a pronounced increase in their scores at the conclusion of this style of curriculum, their ability to work with their peers, complete projects cooperatively and engage in thoughtful, academic discussion will increase. These skills are those that will help them beyond the confines of an English classroom.

The findings clearly indicate that this model will help students achieve more in the classroom. When they are given the opportunity to work cooperatively with their peers, engage in discussions that make sense in their own lives and have the chance
(and expectation to) rely on one another, students respond well. It is not a model that can be implemented without preparation, but with the necessary planning, the structures of *Collaboration in Action* can be adapted into any classroom and positive results should be expected.
VIII. CONCLUSION

Over the course of my tenure at my school site, nothing has made me happier or more proud than the progress that my journalism and yearbook classes have made. When I started out, I had a disjointed, hodge-podge of kids who weren’t sure they wanted to be there and didn’t really want a whole lot to do with me. I was fortunate in that they had an interest in writing and journalism, but the classroom was not a community. I knew that before we could focus our efforts on creating a quality product, we had to turn our energy towards building a community in our classroom. This community aimed to support its members, work together, include everyone and achieve several common goals (including completing our publication).

Fortunately, I had the flexibility of teaching an elective course working in my favor. I was able to devote portions of each class period to team building activities, icebreakers and general community maintenance over the course of the school year. I saw the impact that these sorts of activities had on the classroom environment and was able to actively compare the way my elective courses functioned in comparison to the other English courses I was teaching. Early on, I saw that there was something different developing in my elective courses and over the three years I have been advising, that community has only grown.

Not only did my journalism and yearbook courses have a strong community aspect, but I also observed a striking difference in the level of engagement among my students. The students in these courses always came to class, ready to work and invested in the projects that they were tasked with. The staffers were willing to work
hard, put in additional effort and take ownership over what they were creating. They understood that their peers needed them to be effective workers and that the success of everyone relied upon the success of individuals in the class.

I recognized that my elective courses were unique. I had spent enough time in classrooms in a variety of capacities to understand that the levels of enthusiasm and work ethic in my courses were not the norm. I appreciated the differences of my classes, but I also knew that that kind of success didn’t have to exist in elective courses alone. Having been frustrated by the lack of engagement in my English classes, I wondered if it were possible to elicit the same sort of attitudes my elective students had from my English students. I began to critically examine my elective courses and try to pinpoint the elements that set them apart from my English class.

It became clear to me, early on, that there were certain things that I couldn’t replicate. Students returning to the course, the publication and mass distribution of a product, incentives like conventions and camps, as well as structured time to work outside of class were all things that were unique to my elective courses. But I knew that mimicking the structure that had taken shape and trying to build the sense of community that had been developed was definitely within reason.

In my regular English 9 classroom, I took the collaborative learning environment that drove journalism and yearbook and set it in motion along side a novel study. While my English students struggled to adjust to the new structure and new expectations of group work, they eventually hit their stride and achieved many successes through this unit of study. It became evident that the group-working
environment was helpful for students who tended to be lower-achievers. For students who were typically higher achievers, the new structure of the class was a struggle for them and not all of them were able to perform at the same levels they had previously demonstrated.

This observation was challenging to me for a number of reasons. The students in my elective courses typically were high-achievers, so to see that strong students in my English class didn’t do as well in this kind of environment contradicted what I thought I knew about collaboration and very capable students. Also, I was concerned that I had done a disservice to my stronger students by subjecting them to an environment that hadn’t allowed them to flourish. But despite their lower scores on individual assignments and the final exam, my higher-level students still felt that they benefitted from the experience. This demonstrated to me that academic mastery might not always be a key indicator of success. My students gained valuable social and collaboration skills through this unit.

Prior to the implementation of this project, the class average in my English 9 course was a D. Over the course of this project, the return rate and overall scores for my students’ work steadily increased. Where some students previously turned few or no assignments in, the collaborative environment encouraged them to complete work because their peers were counting on them. And while some of my stronger students did exhibit a decline in their work quality, the majority of students did not. This curriculum was effective in garnering positive results from nearly three quarters of all the students evaluated.
Overall, *Collaboration in Action* proved to be an effective model for collaboration in the classroom. Students were able to work together, learn together and develop a sense of community together. I knew that these were things that were important to academic success and this implementation showed that they could be achieved in the same fashion as in my elective courses, despite a change in setting.

The development of this curriculum showed me that elective courses don’t have to be special. It shouldn’t be just in the journalism class that students work together. It shouldn’t be only ASB where the students feel comfortable and supported. Environments that embrace student voice, encourage openness and sharing and allow for effective collaboration and discourse can happen anywhere. I was skeptical that this approach would work in an English class, and I found that, despite my initial misgivings, collaboration and community could be very effective. The structure and environment that journalism and yearbook have do not occur organically in an English course, but intervention and scaffolding can assist in creating them and effective maintenance can keep them functioning effectively.

My findings indicate that a curriculum like *Collaboration in Action* can be an effective method for achieving a number of important goals that many teachers have. This unit is set up to utilize authentic learning and collaboration to increase motivation and engagement in students, especially those who are traditionally under performing.

This implementation clearly demonstrated to me that creating community is the first step in establishing an effective learning environment. If students feel like the belong in the classroom, that they are supported by their teachers and their peers and
that their voice will be heard, getting them to connect to the material becomes much
easier. As community is built, students begin to establish roles in the classroom and
create functions to help them be effective contributors. Even for students who struggle
academically, community can be a simple solution to a disengagement problem, or at
least a strong element of a potential solution.

**Considerations for the Future**

When I started out, I was unsure if the team-oriented structure of my elective
courses would work in a regular classroom environment. What my project
demonstrated was that this style of teaching and learning can be effective, with the
proper preparation. It is also the kind of activity that requires maintenance in order to
keep it functioning effectively. There were many activities that were completed during
class time that helped foster the team and community aspect of the class. These were
necessary in order to maintain the environment and relationships of the students within
the classroom, but they did take time away from the curriculum itself.

It would be ideal to implement this type of curriculum early in the year, and
then maintain the structure throughout the school year. If students enter a course with
certain expectations from the beginning, there is less of a challenge and fewer
obstacles to transition from a tradition structure to something different. Additionally,
starting a structure like that used in *Collaboration in Action* early on in the school year
allows for more time for community and support to develop among the students within
the class. Ideally, if a structure like this one was implemented in the Fall, it could be
continued throughout the school year and the grouping assignments could change with each curriculum unit.

The most important thing that any teacher can take away from this curriculum is the importance of teaching students to support one another and to work together towards common goals. These are key components of both community and collaboration, and without them, teachers face an uphill battle in the classroom. By providing the right kind of resources, a scaffolded learning structure and authentic opportunities for student engagement, classrooms can become a place that students want to be, instead of place they want to escape as soon as the bell rings.
Collaboration In Action: The impact of a cooperative learning environment on student engagement in ninth grade English

by

Jessica Jean Young
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LETTER TO TEACHERS

Dear Fellow Educator,

There were a number of factors that motivated me to create this project. First and foremost, I saw the struggles that other new teachers and club advisers went through, trying to structure their classes. I felt the frustrations of not knowing how to get kids to want to work on a project. I understood what it was like to have an idea, but be unsure of how to make it happen. I saw this project as an opportunity to provide answers for other educators who had the same ambitions I have had—to be an effective teacher, working with kids who are excited about learning.

This curriculum took many shapes and forms before it came to rest in the format that you see here. When I originally set out on this project, I was hoping to figure out what makes my journalism classroom work. I wanted to figure out what made those students tick, why they worked so well together and what kept them coming to class day after day. After much thought and analysis, I realized that the best way to figure this out was to pull the class apart and apply the most feasible elements in another context.

I identified the strongest elements of my journalism classroom and created a structure and unit based around those key concepts. I determined that the collaborative and cooperative nature of my journalism classes had a powerful effect on the students in them. I then noted that my journalism students were incredibly motivated and engaged during their time in class. It was clear to me that there was a connection between the work environment and the behaviors that my students exhibited.

It was with these ideas in mind that I set forth in creating the Collaboration In Action curriculum. It is my hope that the activities outlined here can provide ideas, structure and assistance for other teachers, whether they are looking for a novel unit or are trying to figure out how to set up a classroom newsroom.

While this curriculum was used in an English classroom, it could be easily applied to any class, in any subject area. The model is flexible enough that it can be applied in a variety of settings. The structure for the novel unit is tailored to work with Victor Martínez’s Parrot in the Oven. That is by no means the only novel that it would work alongside. The activities and projects could easily be adapted to adhere to any number of class readings or projects.

I hope that you find these materials useful. Within this appendix, you will find first the pre-implementation activities, followed by the other features of the implementation.

Sincerely,
Jessica Young
Certified Journalism Educator
English Teacher
PRE IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITES

*Group Work Survey*

Name: ___________________________  Period: ___________________________

There are no correct answers on this survey. Simply answer honestly and be willing to support your answers. You get credit simply for participating. Thank you for taking this activity seriously.

1. Do you enjoy working in groups?
   1  2  3  4  5
   No, I hate it!  Eh, it’s ok.  LOVE IT!

   *Why do you like/dislike group work?*

2. Do you learn better in a group setting?
   1  2  3  4  5
   No, I don’t learn anything.  It’s the same.  I feel like a genius.

   *Why do you think your learning is impacted this way?*

3. How comfortable are you relying on your classmates to complete tasks?
   1  2  3  4  5
   They won’t do it.  They MIGHT do it.  I trust them.

   *Why do you feel this way about your peers?*

4. Are you more motivated to do your work when in a group setting?
   1  2  3  4  5
   Doesn’t matter.  Slightly more motivated.  I work harder.

   *Why or why not?*

5. Rate the quality of your work when you work with a group on a project.
   1  2  3  4  5
   F Quality  C Quality  A Quality

   *Why do you think your grade is effected this way?*
1. What do you enjoy the most about working in groups?

2. What do you enjoy the least about working in groups?

3. What sorts of responsibilities should group members have in a group project?

4. What is the teacher’s role in the class when students work in groups?

5. If students work together on a project, how should they be graded?

6. How should group members handle a student who doesn’t do his work? What should the teacher do?

7. What motivates you to participate, do your work and stay on task in class?
**Group Work Contract**  
**Ms. Young**

Group Members:
1. ____________________________________  
2. ____________________________________
3. ____________________________________  
4. ____________________________________
5. ____________________________________  
6. ____________________________________

As a member of this group, I, _________________________________________, promise to be an active participate, who shares the workload with my fellow group members.

I understand that working in a group is a privilege, granted to me by Ms. Young. If I cannot prove to be a good group-worker then I will forfeit my group work privileges.

When working in a group I will:
⇒ Use my time effectively
⇒ Share my ideas with my group members openly
⇒ Work in my assigned (or picked) group
⇒ Promptly follow directions given to me
⇒ Work cooperatively with others
⇒ Be friendly and respectful to all members of my group

By signing this contract, I agree to adhere to all the policies outlined above, as well as any additional instructions or guidelines provided by Ms. Young. I understand that my cooperation with my group members and Ms. Young are crucial to my grade. If have any problems, questions or concerns it is my responsibility to communicate them in a polite, professional manner.

______________________________
Student signature

______________________________
Parent signature

______________________________
Teacher signature
Class-Generated Expectations

Good Group Members Should:
- Work Hard
- Be On Time
- Participate
- Ask Questions
- Collaborate/Work Together
- Motivate Each Other
- Communicate Well
- Be On Task

Good Group Members Should NOT:
- Be Absent/Tardy
- Slack Off
- Be Lazy
- Be Distracting
- Be Rude or Mean
- Be Inappropriate
- Be Dishonest

The Teacher Should:
- Help when needed
- Check in on progress
- Watch for people not doing work
- Give good suggestions
- Keep students on task
- Hold students accountable for work
- Be positive
- Be friendly
Jobs for Working in Groups

The Reporter: The talker. This person will topics that the group discussed among themselves during class discussions.

The Recorder: This is the person who is in charge of taking notes during discussion and filling out any group-based assignments.

The Organizer: This student will divide up the tasks for the day and making sure all the group members had their necessary supplies (novels, paper, etc.).

The Task Manager: This person is the boss of the day. This person oversees the work being completed, ensuring that things would be completed on time and that the group members are on task and working. This person is responsible for turning in all assignments at the end of class.

The Researcher(s): These students support all the other members of the group in their tasks by using the resources provided to check answers, look up information and provide background and context when necessary.

Daily Duties for Group Work

Today’s Date: ________________________

Group Members:

____________________________________

Reporter:

____________________________________

Recorder:

____________________________________

Task Manager:

____________________________________

Researcher(s):

____________________________________

Organizer:

____________________________________
IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

Pre Reading Inference Activity

PARROT IN THE OVEN
by Victor Martinez

The following are the titles of the eleven chapters of Parrot in the Oven.
What can you predict about the contents of this book from these titles?

CONTENTS

1 The Baseball Glove
2 Rico's Pool Hall
3 Charity
4 The Bullet
5 The Garden
6 The Rifle
7 The Boxing Match
8 Family Affair
9 Dying of Love
10 A Test of Courage
11 Going Home
Sample Reading Comprehension Questions  
(Klar et al. 2003)

Respond to Chapters 1–3

1. Personal Response  Manny’s history teacher, Mr. Hart, generously offers to help Manny. Has anyone unexpectedly offered to help you in some way? Did you accept the offer? Why or why not?

2. Setting  What are the conditions in the chili pepper fields? Why do you think people are willing to work in these conditions? Use the word poverty in your response.

3. Comparisons  Compare what Manny says and thinks about the men in his life—his father, his brother, his grandfather, and Mr. Hart. Who do you think he respects the most? Why?

4. Generate Questions  Write a question about this section for someone else reading this book. Exchange questions with them. Do you agree with their answer?
Sample PowerPoint: Feature Writing

What is a feature?
- Draws on HUMAN INTEREST
- PERSONALIZES the story for readers
- Uses UNUSUAL/INTERESTING information
- GRABS attention
- Tells a STORY

Types of Features
- News feature: Centered around a TIMELY event
- Informative: Focuses on something ODD or UNUSUAL
- Personal experience: Tells the STORY of a person and his/her accomplishments
- Descriptive: Focuses on an EVENT and the sensory details involved
- Profile: Focuses on ONLY one or two things about a person. Very DESCRIPTIVE.
Where do you start?

- Narrow your topic
  - Select an interesting fact to highlight
- Use the 5Ws
  - Who, what, when, where and why
- Organize your information
  - Group similar facts together
    - i.e.: Family history, Educational Background, Accomplishments, etc.

Feature Story Structure

- Lead: First sentence. Grab the reader’s attention!
- Why Paragraph: Give your reader context. Include your 5Ws here.
- Body Paragraphs: Use your categories. Information to fill these paragraphs (3-5)
- Conclusion: Bring everything back together.

Things to Include

- Specifics (avoid generalizations)
- Write in 3rd person (he, she, it)
- Use quotes, but not too many!
- Rely on your five senses.
- Use descriptive words
- Use “said” at the end of quotes.
  - “Stop picking your nose,” Ms. Young said.
Main topic: Victor Martinez

Angle: What will you focus on? (examples: awards, his family, his books, etc.)

Categories of Information

Category 1:

Category 2:

Category 3:
Writing Features

Using the skills and tips that we discussed in class, work with your group to compose a feature about our author, Victor Martinez. Look over your notes and follow the suggestions that are provided.

**Hook**

Grab your reader’s attention. What is interesting about this topic? What stands out to you?

**The WHY Paragraph**

Provide context for your reader. Answer the 5Ws and 1H about your topic.

**Body Paragraphs**

Group your information together in categories. Write them in paragraphs.

**Conclusion**

Wrap everything up for your reader. They shouldn’t be left with any questions.
Sample Reading Comprehension Quiz

Parrot in the Oven

Name ____________________________

Chapters 1-3 Quiz

Chapter 1 ~
1. What is Manny’s goal and how does he go about achieving it?

2. Name all of the family members.

3. Explain the meaning of Manny’s observation on page 6 ~ “Years of not knowing what besides work was expected from a Mexican convinced me that I wouldn’t pass from this earth without putting in a lot of days.”

4. How do Manny and Nardo compare in terms of their work ethic? Explain.

Chapter 2 ~
1. How do Manny’s parents discipline him? What do you think of their methods?

2. Why is the father angry with the Garcia brothers?

3. Give an example of a time when you witnessed a person ruin something for an entire group of people.
4. Describe Manny’s neighborhood.

5. Explain Mr. Hernandez’ comparison of people to money.

6. What effect might this attitude have on Manny? How much do parental attitudes toward life affect the personalities of children?

7. How does Manny handle the Garcia brothers? What does this strategy tell us about his personality?

Chapter 3 ~

1. What is Manny’s attitude toward his mother’s dreams for him?

2. What does the teacher think of Manny’s chances for a good future?

3. How does Manny feel about his father?
Sample Journaling Prompts
Week Three Journal

From the story:
Manny is having to make very difficult choices in the story. What are some of the hard choices you have had to make in your life? What did you learn from making these choices? How do you think your life would be different if you had chosen differently?

From class:
Which “job” do you enjoy doing the most? How does having jobs for group work effect you/your group? Does it work better or worse? Why? How has your ability to work with your group changed over the past four weeks?

From your group:
Which group members are working hard this week? Who is struggling? What can Ms. Young do to help your group be more effective?
Parrot In The Oven
Final Test Study Guide

Group member names:

Chapter 1
1. ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   A) _____________________________________________________________
   B) _____________________________________________________________
   C) _____________________________________________________________
   D) _____________________________________________________________

2. ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   A) _____________________________________________________________
   B) _____________________________________________________________
   C) _____________________________________________________________
   D) _____________________________________________________________
3. ______________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   A) _____________________________________________________________
   B) _____________________________________________________________
   C) _____________________________________________________________
   D) _____________________________________________________________

4. ______________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   A) _____________________________________________________________
   B) _____________________________________________________________
   C) _____________________________________________________________
   D) _____________________________________________________________

5. ______________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   ________________________________________________________________
   A) _____________________________________________________________
   B) _____________________________________________________________
   C) _____________________________________________________________
   D) _____________________________________________________________
Final Exam

Class Set. Do not write on me!

Parrot in the Oven

Final Exam
English 9
Ms. Young

1. Who is the author of the story?
   a. Walt Disney
   b. Helen Keller
   c. Walter Cronkite
   d. Victor Martinez

2. Who is the main character in the story?
   a. Manny Hernandez
   b. Manny Fonseca
   c. Nardo Hernandez
   d. Bianca Castillo

3. What job did Manny and his brother get so he could buy a baseball glove?
   a. Selling candy
   b. Pepper picking
   c. Stealing money from old ladies
   d. Selling drugs

4. What is Manny’s brother’s name?
   a. Mexican guy
   b. Roberto or Robby
   c. Bernardo or Nardo
   d. Jose Jalepeno

5. What happens in the pepper field?
   a. Santa comes to town
   b. They get jumped by illegals
   c. Manny has a seizure

6. How many sisters does Manny have?
   a. 4
   b. 2
   c. 3
   d. 1

7. What is Dad’s favorite hang out spot?
   a. Home
   b. Grandma’s garden
   c. Rico’s Pool Hall
   d. Disneyland

8. Who wasn’t allowed in the pool hall?
   a. English, Yearbook and Photography teachers
   b. Kids
   c. White people
   d. Women

9. Who goes to get Dad from Rico’s?
   a. Nardo
   b. Manny
   c. Grandma
   d. Mom

10. What is Manny’s little sister’s name?
    a. Juanita
    b. Lilliana
11. What did Mom want for Manny?
   a. To take care of Pedi
   b. To leave the house
   c. To go buy groceries
   d. To have a good education and better future

12. What is the teacher’s name that helped Manny?
   a. Mr. Garcia
   b. Ms. Young
   c. Ms. Steadry
   d. Mr. Hart

13. What did the teacher give Manny?
   a. Lunch
   b. School supplies
   c. Money
   d. New shoes

14. What did Dad do with the money from Mr. Hart?
   a. Told Manny to save it
   b. Ripped it up
   c. Threw it away
   d. Took it from him

15. Why did Magda leave Pedi with Manny?
   a. To go see her boyfriend
   b. To go to school
   c. To go get Mom
   d. To go buy groceries

16. Where is Mom when dad comes home?
   a. Getting her hair done at a friend’s house
   b. Getting her nails done

17. Who helps Dad look for bullets?
   a. Manny
   b. Nardo
   c. Mom
   d. Pedi

18. Why was Dad mad at Mom?
   a. She embarrassed him at the pool hall
   b. She spent all their money on clothes
   c. She wasn’t home when he got there
   d. She’s pregnant again

19. What does Dad do to Mom?
   a. Takes her on a trip
   b. Buys her a new coat
   c. Chases her and tries to shoot her
   d. Hits her

20. Why do the police arrest Dad?
   a. He’s drunk
   b. He spit on them
   c. He has an unregistered gun
   d. He is not a legal citizen

21. Who does Manny almost shoot?
   a. Magda
   b. Himself
   c. Nardo
   d. Pedi

22. Why do Mom and Magda get into a fight?
   a. Mom thinks Magda is sneaking around
   b. Magda stole money from Mom
c. Mom took Magda’s dress
d. Mom thinks Madga should get a job
c. He had a lot of jobs
d. He was out partying and drinking

23. Where does Magda work?
a. McDonald’s  
b. Beauty shop  
c. Valley Laundry  
d. Wal Mart

24. Why did Dad wake up Nardo and Manny early in the morning?
a. To go to school  
b. To go work in the fields  
c. To go steal cars  
d. To go clean Grandma’s yard

25. Who’s mom is Grandma?
a. Dad’s  
b. Mom’s  
c. Nardo’s  
d. Pedi’s

26. Why was Nardo moving so slow when cleaning the yard?
a. His tummy hurt  
b. He was mad at Manny  
c. He’s pregnant  
d. He had a hangover

27. What did Mom mean when she said to Magda, “Don’t make the same mistake I did. You’ll ruin your life!”
a. Don’t get pregnant at a young age  
b. Don’t do drugs  
c. Don’t start working so young  
d. Don’t tease your hair

28. Why was Nardo never home?
a. He played sports  
b. He was with his girlfriend

29. What was Magda crazy about?
a. Hair  
b. Make Up  
c. Records  
d. Ricky Martin

30. Why didn’t Manny get transferred to the new school?
a. He was too old  
b. It was too far away  
c. Administration said it was too full and too late  
d. He wasn’t smart enough

31. Who did many like to watch at school?
a. Diana  
b. Ms. Young  
c. Ms. Farrington  
d. Ms. Van Der Meer

32. Who is Lencho?
a. A bully at school  
b. Manny’s oldest brother  
c. Manny’s cousin  
d. A guidance counselor

33. Who does Lencho want on his boxing team?
a. Manny  
b. Albert  
c. Magdeleno  
d. Nardo

34. Who joins the boxing team?
a. Manny  
b. Albert  
c. Dakota  
d. Nardo
35. What was Manny’s job for the boxing team?
   a. Lead boxer
   b. Official Trainer
   c. Promoter

36. Who is the star boxer on the other team?
   a. Ms. Young
   b. Albert Sosa
   c. Mondo Grande
   d. Boise Johnson

37. What is the name of the gang that Lencho belongs to?
   a. The Crips
   b. The Callaway Gang
   c. The Berets
   d. The Black Panthers

38. Who wins the boxing match?
   a. Manny
   b. Albert
   c. Boise Johnson
   d. Lencho

39. What do the Berets do after the match?
   a. Beat up Mondo
   b. Beat up Lencho
   c. Kick Lencho out of the gang
   d. Kill Lencho’s mother

40. Why do the Berets kick Lencho out of the gang?
   a. He cried like a girl
   b. He cheated
   c. He stole from them
   d. He shamed them by losing the match

41. What does Manny think happened to Magda at first?
   a. She got shot
   b. She has the flu
   c. She got hit by a car
   d. She’s pregnant

42. What was really happening to Magda?
   a. She had food poisoning
   b. Her boyfriend dumped her
   c. She was shot in the stomach
   d. She was having a miscarriage

43. How many babies had Mom lost?
   a. 1
   b. 5
   c. 2
   d. 0

44. How did Mom want Manny to help?
   a. Go away
   b. Call Dad
   c. Call 911
   d. Help carry Magda inside

45. How was Manny’s family treated at the hospital?
   a. They were seen right away
   b. They were sent to a different hospital
   c. They were treated very rudely
   d. No one paid attention to them

46. Who did Mom want to keep from finding out about Magda?
   a. Nardo
   b. Eddie
   c. Pedi
   d. Dad
47. How did they get Magda’s fever to go down at home?
   a. Made her stand outside
   b. Gave her aspirin
   c. Gave her water
   d. Put her in a cool bath

48. Who helped take care of Magda?
   a. Nardo
   b. Grandma
   c. The neighbor
   d. Dad

49. What is Dad’s nickname for Manny?
   a. Tonto
   b. Pendejo
   c. Guapo
   d. Perrico

50. Who invites Manny to a party?
   a. Nardo
   b. Mrs. Kingsley
   c. Dorothy
   d. Lencho

51. Who is Mr. Giddens?
   a. The pharmacy owner
   b. The doctor
   c. A school teacher
   d. A policeman

52. Who finally gets a job towards the end of the story?
   a. Dad
   b. Nardo
   c. Magda
   d. Both A and B

53. Who helps Nardo with his deliveries?
   a. Pedi
   b. Eddie
   c. Magda
   d. Manny

54. Who is Mr. Gidden’s daughter?
   a. Dorothy
   b. Patty
   c. Connie
   d. Tina

55. Why do Manny and Magda make fun of Manny?
   a. He wasn’t invited to the party
   b. Dorothy doesn’t really want him there
   c. They invited him so he could clean
   d. They are going to beat him up with he gets there

56. Who does Manny dance with at the party?
   a. Patty
   b. Dorothy
   c. Magda
   d. Gloria

57. What does Manny do that upsets everyone at the party?
   a. He smokes a cigarette
   b. He drinks too much
   c. He calls the cops
   d. He dances too close to Gloria

58. Who punks on Manny at the party?
   a. Red-Hair
   b. Nardo
   c. Dorothy
   d. Mr. Giddens

59. What did Dad like to sing in the shower?
   a. Quiero morir de amor or quiero vivir con amor
   b. Quiero vivir con mi amor
   c. Yo quiero Taco Bell
60. Why does Manny think he doesn’t get along with girls?
   a. He’s ugly
   b. He’s annoying
   c. He’s yellow
   d. He smells bad

d. Quiero vivir en una casa grande

65. Which two gang members are related?
   a. Mondo and Frankie
   b. Frankie and Eddie
   c. Frankie and Gody
   d. Eddie and Mondo

61. What does Frankie promise Manny?
   a. That he’ll get to spend time with a girl
   b. He’ll get money
   c. He’ll get drugs
   d. He won’t get picked on anymore

66. Which person is NOT a member of the gang?
   a. Frankie
   b. Albert
   c. Mondo
   d. Eddie

62. What is the name of the gang Manny tries to join?
   a. The West Side gang
   b. The Holloway Projects gang
   c. The Callaway gang
   d. The Projects gang

67. What lie does Manny tell his mom?
   a. That he’s sick
   b. That he got beat up
   c. That he’s going to play baseball
   d. That he has Saturday School

63. What is the initiation into the gang like?
   a. The new person has to steal a car
   b. The new person has to kill someone
   c. The new person has to break into a house
   d. The new person has to tolerate getting beat up

68. Where does Manny go?
   a. To meet the gang at the mall
   b. To play baseball
   c. To school
   d. To work with Nardo

64. What is the reward for getting into the gang?
   a. The new person gets to hook up with a girl
   b. The new person gets a new car

69. What was the weather like?
   a. Sunny and warm
   b. Windy and rainy
   c. Hot and humid
   d. Snowing

70. Who did Manny get to make out with?
   a. Gloria
   b. Magda
   c. Patty
   d. Rita
71. Where does the gang hang out while they are making plans?
   a. The movie theater
   b. Mondo’s house
   c. Long’s Drugstore
   d. Gidden’s Pharmacy

72. Who else is in the parking lot?
   a. The police
   b. A black man selling newspapers
   c. Mondo
   d. Nardo

73. Why does Mondo decide to go home?
   a. He has plans with Patty—ALONE
   b. He has to work
   c. His mom called
   d. He’s cold

74. Who does Manny stay with?
   a. Frankie
   b. Mondo
   c. Nardo
   d. Eddie

75. Where does Eddie jump a lady?
   a. The movie theater
   b. The drug store
   c. The park
   d. Outside the bank

76. What does Manny do?
   a. Helps Eddie
   b. Distracts the lady
   c. Diverts the police
   d. Chases Eddie

77. Who does Manny recognize Eddie as?
   a. Magda’s boyfriend
   b. His cousin
   c. Mondo’s brother
   d. A bully from school

78. What does the man selling newspapers do?
   a. Tells the cops Manny was trying to stop Eddie
   b. Tells the cops which way Eddie went
   c. Tells Manny to calm down and be cool
   d. All of the above

79. What does Manny realize?
   a. He needs to get away from the police
   b. He needs to get home
   c. He doesn’t want to be a part of the gang
   d. He misses his mom

80. Who is sleeping on the couch when Manny goes home?
   a. Mom and Magda
   b. Pedi and Magda
   c. Nardo and Pedi
   d. Dad and Nardo

81. What does Manny compare his experiences to?
   a. A battle
   b. A fairy tale
   c. A long journey
   d. An action movie

82. What does Manny claim is the most wondrous sight?
   a. His sisters sleeping on the couch together
   b. His mom and dad dancing
   c. Nardo working
   d. The house on fire
83. Who does Manny see when he is walking home?
   a. Mondo
   b. Lencho
   c. The Berets
   d. The Garcia Brothers

84. What were the boys on the porch doing when Manny walked by?
   a. Calling him names
   b. Cutting their toenails
   c. Eating apples with salt
   d. Drinking

85. Why does Manny’s Dad say he is like a parrot in the oven?
   a. He is too trusting of other people
   b. He is stupid and ugly
   c. He smells like cooked bird
   d. He doesn’t listen to other people
Reading Response Prompts

Select ONE of the prompts listed below and compose a thoughtful, well-written response. Your writing should demonstrate your understanding of both the novel you have chosen, as well as the literary terms we have discussed in class. As always, you should be utilizing your strong, academic writing skills.

Your response should be handwritten, on notebook paper, skipping every other line. Please appropriately head your paper with your first and last name, class period and date on the UPPER RIGHT HAND corner of the paper. Your response should be AT LEAST two pages long. Please CIRCLE the prompt you have selected.

Resources you can use:
-Your book
-Your Lit Terms notes
-A dictionary/thesaurus

Resources you CANNOT use:
-Your neighbor
-Your neighbor’s notes
-The text book
-Computers

1. What were your feelings after reading the opening chapter(s) of this book? After reading half the book? How about after finishing the book?

2. What connections are there between the book and your own life? How are you similar or different from Manny and his family? Explain. Use examples from the book to illustrate your points.

3. Write the next chapter of the book. What happens after Manny decides what kind of person he wants to be? Where does the story take him and his family?


5. Imagine you are Manny. What is about this character that you like? Explain. What personality traits of this character would you like to acquire? What do you have in common with this character? What would you have done differently in the story if you were Manny?
Exit Survey
Group Work Survey

Name: ____________________________________ Period: __________________

There are no correct answers on this survey. Simply answer honestly and be willing to support your answers. You get credit simply for participating. Thank you for taking this activity seriously.

1. Do you enjoy working in groups?

1 2 3 4 5
No, I hate it! Eh, it’s ok. LOVE IT!

Why do you like/dislike group work?

2. Do you learn better in a group setting?

1 2 3 4 5
No, I don’t learn anything. It’s the same. I feel like a genius.

Why do you think your learning is impacted this way?

3. How comfortable are you relying on your classmates to complete tasks?

1 2 3 4 5
They won’t do it. They MIGHT do it. I trust them.

Why do you feel this way about your peers?

4. Are you more motivated to do your work when in a group setting?

1 2 3 4 5
Doesn’t matter. Slightly more motivated. I work harder.

Why or why not?

5. Rate the quality of your work when you work with a group on a project.

1 2 3 4 5
F Quality C Quality A Quality

Why do you think your grade is effected this way?
1. What do you enjoy the most about working in groups?

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

2. What do you enjoy the least about working in groups?

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

3. What sorts of responsibilities should group members have in a group project?

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

4. What is the teacher’s role in the class when students work in groups?

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

5. If students work together on a project, how should they be graded?

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

7. What motivates you to participate, do your work and stay on task in class?

_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
REFERENCES


Rovai, A. P. (July 01, 2002). Development of an Instrument To Measure Classroom Community. Internet and Higher Education, 5, 3, 197-211.


