

## **Creating Spaces and Building Bridges: Reflections on the 2013 NYS TESOL Conference**

*by Barbara Suter*

A couple of summers ago, my daughter and I visited Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. Archaeologists view this site as one of the great centers of ancestral Puebloan culture. There is no doubt among them that humans came together there often to trade and to celebrate something they valued and shared in common.

My trip to the NYS TESOL Annual Conference in White Plains in mid-November took only a few hours of my time and some adjustments to my work schedule. Like the ancestral Puebloans, I felt the call to be with “my people.” Being an ESL teacher in a K–12 public school has many rewards and drawbacks, but I think few will disagree that it can often be a very isolating experience. For the most part, an ESL teacher spends the day in a classroom alone in a building filled with teachers with whom we share little in common, professionally speaking. It is often difficult to find common ground, though it is necessary to do so.

ESL teachers at all levels of education, therefore, need to create spaces and build bridges in order to successfully carry on their work; doing so, in fact, is essential to our survival. Yvonne Pratt Johnson, a professor at St. John’s University and mentor for future teachers of ELLs, introduced these very concepts in her keynote speech at our recent conference, and her words struck a deep chord within me. Twenty years ago, early in my career as an ESL teacher, about five or six of my colleagues and I met weekly for lunch at a local diner. We were all new at our jobs and desperate for professional collegiality and support, and took comfort in the fact that we were all struggling with the same challenges of teaching English language learners. This was a space we created for ourselves, and we cherished it.

As the years went by, we continued our lunches. A few colleagues dropped out for various reasons, but for those who were left, our shared lunch was a sacred space. Eventually, a new director of ESL, whom we all loved, was hired. Our monthly ESL meeting with him became our new sacred space. It was a place where we were encouraged to discuss matters of special concern to us and a place we felt safe and appreciated.

Let us fast forward to the era of the Common Core and data-driven instruction. I very much feel that ELLs have been an afterthought in this initiative to raise standards for K–12 students in our nation. Although an effort is now being made to retrofit the standards to ELLs, and to devise performance indicators for them that match up with the levels of English Language Proficiency, my gut feeling is that these endeavors are not addressing the real needs of ELLs. Today at a departmental meeting I protested that a brand-new NES student was made to sit for an interim third-grade math assessment when I knew he couldn’t read a word of English, is reading at a first-grade level in Spanish, and barely knows his numbers, much less how to solve complex word problems (in English). I explained that subjecting him to that test flies in the face of all I have learned as an ESL teacher: in particular, treating the student with respect, having some compassion for his situation as a new arrival, and making him feel comfortable with our school culture. The response: We need the data on him.

Clearly the need for sacred spaces where we can exchange information as ESL professionals continues and bridges must continue to be built to those who share our concerns. The high point of the conference for me was working with the many graduate-student volunteers I had recruited in my role as the conference chairperson for volunteers. They were all bright and shiny, eager to serve the profession and full of energy. Many shared interesting foreign travel experiences with

me and were looking forward to embarking on their new careers. Working alongside these very capable volunteers, I could believe I was building a bridge to the future of our profession.

*Barbara Suter was the Chair of Professional Concerns for the 2011-2013 Executive Board for NYS TESOL. <bsuter@eastmeadow.k12.ny.us>*