

# Teachers' Active Learning Center (TALC): A Case Study

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*Recounted here is the story of the development of the Teachers' Active Learning Center in Oakland. Born of the hopes and dreams of a few innovators, this center now has matured in its service to all its constituents.*

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ONE of the most difficult tasks of anyone who works in or benefits from a teachers center is that of describing what happens in it and what results from it. It is like trying to measure an orange with a ruler. Quantitative terms like test scores and cost analysis sheets do not tell the whole story. What is needed and what we have tried to do is document the major facets of the operation and the history of the Teachers' Active Learning Center during its six years of development and operation. Hopefully, through a "case study" of this kind, the reader can identify the key factors that make the center work: the active learning environment, the books and apparatus, the tools and plants, the interdisciplinary curriculum content, the surplus industrial materials, the cross-fertilization of ideas, the mutual trust of teachers and administrators, and, most important, the centrality of each participating teacher's interest, needs, and abilities—the starting point of learning.

Let me describe what you would see if you were to walk into the center with the

purpose of finding out how it could help you. A first impression would probably be one of space—sunny, airy, plant-filled space marked by a variety of colors, levels, books, apparatus, and thematic displays of teacher-made learning materials and children's work.

A tour of the center will take you through the Communication Hub (red box of "What I did" cards filled out each time a teacher comes; workshop schedule and sign up sheets; blue questionnaires for suggestions, resource help, and Teacher Advisory Group participation; Materials Request kiosk; Idea Bank; Consultation Corner) en route to a second large room. This is the craft/construction/surplus materials room where there are hand and power tools, tables, displays of teacher-made furniture and manipulative learning activities, and varicolored barrels and bins of surplus materials which businesses have donated for teachers to use to make learning materials and classroom environments.

At this point of the tour, the first-time guest usually asks several questions, somewhat in the same order. "How does it work? How did it start? How did it get here? How can we keep it here?" This case study attempts to answer those questions in detail.

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## How Does It Work?

The Teachers' Active Learning Center (TALC) works through a "mix" of several ingredients: the visual and kinesthetic impact of the physical learning environment; the teachers' engagement with concrete learning materials; the social interaction of participants and staff; the on-going curriculum development; and ad hoc teacher-designed workshops and study groups; the on-going analysis of the process and program; the continuous individualized support of teachers; and the mutual trust of administrators, teachers, and staff.

When we consider that it was the British example of teachers centres which inspired the development of TALC, it is not surprising that there is mutual trust between administrators and teachers involved in TALC now in 1975. When we first conceived of the center in 1969, there was distrust about district "in-service" in the minds of many teachers. To avoid that conception of the teachers center's offerings, we kept TALC independent of college and district systems in the beginning. As teacher participants began to work out TALC courses on a contract basis with their administrators in several districts in 1973, it became clear that teacher-centered professional development could function in a district setting—given supportive administration.

The "teachers" who come to the center include parents, principals, resource teachers, instructional assistants, and personnel in ancillary positions involved with teaching and learning in the classroom. Participants include nurses, researchers, librarians, secretaries, and vice-principals. They come from schools within a fifty-mile radius and they come for many reasons. Some drop by to share a problem or success in a short conversation. Some come by appointment to plan their own series of center work to earn credit from the district or state university. Others come for information about resources for developing curriculum, integrated multi-ethnic curricula, for example. Some come for scheduled content workshops after school.

Others come for study groups they have formed, such as researching alternative assessment techniques. Still others come to develop interdisciplinary curriculum.

At whatever entry point a "teacher" comes, there is usually something or someone to listen and to help. Whether it is help to set up a learning center or relaxing over a cup of tea, the teacher will generally find what he or she seeks. When we do not have a particular material or resource, we will help the teacher improvise or suggest other district and community resources with which we have developed mutually supportive relationships.

In order to provide this kind of ad hoc help, the qualifications of staff members are consistent with the philosophy of the center. Ideally, there are at least three full time content persons, a secretary-coordinator, and a media specialist responsible for documentation and environment (TALC has operated with two persons only through superhuman, exhausting efforts). Each staff member has experience in active learning for children and adults, a knowledge of curriculum content—usually in one field particularly, a sensitivity to the role of the learning environment, responsiveness to other people, experience with curriculum development, and a trust that learners will learn through a variety of styles and pace—given supportive conditions, appropriate materials, structure, and purpose.

There are five major characteristics of this "mix" at work: active learning process, individualized and nonjudgmental support, developmental pace, interdisciplinary curriculum framework, and teacher-centered program.

*Active Learning.* Active learning permeates most of what goes on, whether it is teachers filling out their own activity cards or measuring varying degrees of heat on plastic meat trays. Generally you will find teachers making, doing, talking, exploring, or absorbed in thought or study. Workshops provide the clearest example of active learning. In workshops, teachers first *do* an activity involving two or more disciplines—like

science and math or social studies and art—and then *make* or invent an apparatus or learning sequence by which their children can learn at their level.

*Individualized, nonjudgmental support.* As a teacher said last week, “It’s personalized education for teachers.” We try to arrange the “open hours” so that a staff member can greet each participant, listen to his or her wants or needs, and suggest or collect the materials, research, possibilities, or resource people needed. This attention alone seems to communicate concern. A teacher wrote on a questionnaire this fall, “. . . the one place where I get the feeling that someone really cares about the teachers and children is in Oakland.”

*Developmental pace.* The kind of learning or change which takes place is not instant nor can we guarantee it to occur. But some growth of self-esteem and confidence, some change in classroom environment, some addition to learning materials—these changes take place for most of the teachers who participate. “You cannot force or mandate change,” the staff development consultant of the district said to a visiting educator, “but you can work toward it—together.”

Once a teacher is involved actively and begins to see interdisciplinary possibilities of what he or she is doing, two things occur generally. The teacher begins to make physical and then curricular changes in the classroom. Furniture gets moved to put in a math/science center or a reading corner with a rug made from scraps at the center. Second, “lesson plans” become thematic “starting points” for various time sequences and curriculum “webs” including skill and content areas. These changes come about through the teacher’s own learning, facilitated by the center’s environment, materials, and staff.

*Interdisciplinary curriculum framework.* Surrounding the teachers’ work is an interdisciplinary environment composed of books, natural materials, structural apparatus, graphic displays, and participatory learning centers. Ethnic folk tales are found next to a display of plants to measure and draw, studies of geography, research into a Cali-

fornia Native American tribe, woven baskets filled with plant-dyed wool, materials to make wood block prints or plaster casts of leaves, and a curriculum web of where one might go in a class starting from a study of native California plants. Here, too, the staff member helps the teachers become aware of interdisciplinary extensions. The teacher who comes to make “holiday ornaments” for example soon sees the need of extending the craft activity into the mathematics of measuring, or the science of properties. After a while, learning “how to” is not enough. The teachers want to go away with content.

*Teacher-centered program.* The voice of the teacher is central to the center. Teachers provide the major input into the program, policy, and development of the center. Teachers participate voluntarily; it is self-generated learning. Further, teachers design their “courses,” planning the sequence, content, and pace of the given offerings or designing their own studies.

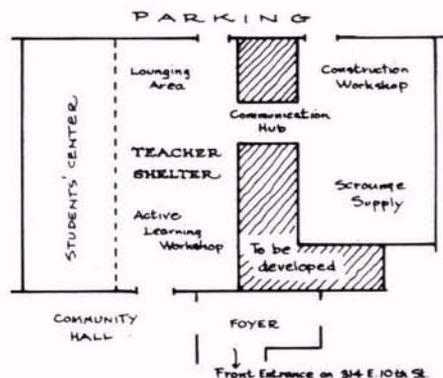
## How Did It Get Started?

The concept of TALC developed from the ideas, energies, and skills of a group of teachers and former teachers who shared a concern for the apparent lack of learning and joy of learning in the San Francisco Bay Area in the late 60’s. We were part of the staff of an off-campus teacher education project (STEP) sponsored by the School of Education, San Francisco State College (now University). STEP was a preservice/in-service program designed for desegregated schools in Sausalito and San Francisco. Of the innovative teacher education techniques tried (video, interaction analyses, mini-teaching, team teaching, and active learning workshops), we found that the active learning workshops in mathematics, cardboard carpentry, learning stations, and ESS science most often appeared to expand the teachers’ abilities to provide more effectively for the variety of learning modes of the children in their desegregated classrooms.

The catalyst for focusing our discovery that active learning was as effective for teachers as it was for children came in the



TALC teachers make preparations for classroom gardening.



person of an addition to the project staff, a San Francisco district teacher who had come back from a year in England. She reported from her work in schools and field courses and her discussions with headmasters, Schools Council personnel, and inspectors that English children in primary schools seemed to be happier learning and to be learning more than children here. Why?—because of the active learning, interdisciplinary curriculum, interactive environment, and the developmental pace that teachers provided in their classrooms. These changes had come about through the work teachers had done in their teachers centres where they engaged in practical group study in content areas and in a nonevaluative, but informative supportive atmosphere. Thus in 1969, three of us began to develop the concept of a British teachers centre adapted to our local conditions.

1969-70. The project moved to San Francisco to a loft in the Redevelopment Area of the Central City. We expanded correspondence with educators in England and the United States who were engaged in similar work. We began to write descriptions of all facets of an "active learning center"

in preparation for seeking funding. We transformed three areas of the loft into a lounge/reading area, an active learning classroom for math and science, and an interdisciplinary curriculum display area. This was the physical beginning of the center, created in spite of doubts expressed by others that "teachers would not come." But teachers came—to several sessions on British Infant Schools and classroom environment, and they came with boxes and bags of scraps which we needed for math/science activities.

1970-71. During the summer, two project members went to England with project money to buy books and apparatus in mathematics, science, language development, and music. One project member was given half-time for coordinating the center. Four others volunteered their "extra" time, mainly on Wednesday nights for math workshops.

We compiled a proposal for continuance of the center from written descriptions with the help of local educators, British educators, foundation personnel, and some community leaders—our informal advisory group. The proposal was sent to local and national foundations. In January, a local foundation granted us \$14,500 seed money for a secre-

tary/coordinator, a media specialist, a math specialist, and consultants. We discovered a visiting British Headmaster and arranged for him to be our "teachers center consultant."

In March, I was sent as emissary of the "Teachers' Active Learning Center" to the East Coast to seek funding for a full time center. (We added "Teachers'" to the title to stress their central position.) By May, over 400 "teachers" had participated in center workshops or visited the center. A "core" group of 50 included mathematics teachers who wanted follow-up from summer workshops and First Year Teacher graduates of our preservice program. There were also interested administrators from surrounding districts (including Oakland), Sacramento, and Washington. By May, too, we had the promise of federal funding through a tri-district Learning Center project out of the Bureau of Educational Personnel Development.

1971-72. Funding did not materialize until late November. Time was spent clarifying the rationale of voluntary, self-generated in-service to local, state, and national educators who were interested in large scale, mandated teacher education for the "critical mass." TALC focused on the "critical nucleus"—teachers who can identify their own needs, who want to change and make classrooms more effective learning spaces. We believed (and still do) that this nucleus could become the catalyst for other teachers to begin to change, that change is a gradual process, and that these teachers might remove themselves from the system and the change process if they were not supported professionally and personally.

The biggest stumbling block was the importance we placed on the central role which the teacher played in decision making about the center and our "open door" policy of involving teachers from all schools—public, private, district, and out-of-district. When the superintendents of the three districts agreed to a compromise design of a teacher majority on the "steering committee" and priorities given to district teachers, the funding was to cover personnel only with the

promise of matching money from a private foundation for operation. At that time we were working out of a college office and our homes and our center equipment, books, and materials were packed in a district warehouse.

On the promise of operational money, we found a 6400 square foot space near the Bay Bridge, which connected the three districts. A private loan and grant secured the lease and enabled us to begin to prepare the learning environment. We gave workshops in schools, consulted in classrooms in various districts, and prepared our interdisciplinary program.

1972-73. When the promised funds came, the year was over, but the foundation gave double its promised amount to cover a full year of full operation. This "rich" year gave us the time and materials to develop most of the components described in the proposal. We transformed the space and opened five days and three nights a week in order to implement the planned program.

1973-74. As the year of plenty came to an end and staff members prepared to look elsewhere, another foundation visited unexpectedly out of interest in the international aspect of our work. We had continued contact with British educators, and one of our staff had expanded communication to her state in Brazil where there was expressed interest in active learning. The foundation granted us \$15,000 which we decided to use to keep the center open for teachers.

Two of us then decided to volunteer time to match the money, with the hope that some potential college projects might materialize. They did not. We therefore found consultant work mainly with San Francisco and Oakland districts and Head Start. The foundation also gave us \$5,000 for training with The Prospect School and Early Education Group of the Educational Testing Service. This grant brought us into a network of five teachers centers, the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation, and Educational Development Corporation.

This lean year became a critical year in TALC's history. The Teacher Advisory Board

was revived; "Friends of TALC" was formed for contributions; administrators worked with us and with their teachers to formulate contracts for our workshop help; consultants became an informal adjunct to the staff in developing program and continuation strategies; community persons continued to give advice. The university continued as our fiscal agent and provided extension credit for teacher-designed work. In sum, a network of committed people provided us with sufficient support to continue our efforts to keep the center operative until it could become a credible vehicle for staff/curriculum development.

### How Did It Get Here?

Both the network of persons and funding conditions caused the move across the Bay to the Oakland Public Schools in August 1974. The foundation promised funding if TALC were housed in a school district. Oakland was the only district which had both space and money. More important, they had administrators and teachers who wanted a teacher-centered center and the TALC staff.

It was understood that if this staffing did not work out, we would leave. My colleague planned to return to classroom teaching so that an Oakland teacher could staff the center, thereafter to be replaced on a rotating basis with other teachers. It was to be a year of "working it out" through tremendous efforts and unbelievable trust among the three parties: teachers, staff, and administration. We planned, organized, moved, painted, and held the Grand Opening in October. By June we had served over 650 participants and 800 visitors who came to tour or study this kind of center. The teachers renamed it the "Teacher Shelter" in reference to a bomb shelter site in the building.

With the move came two new elements which may well ensure the teacher-centered nature of the center—something we feared to lose once we were in a district. By having most of the participants part of a system, there is a wider constituency base to provide not only input but also potential strength in

working for sufficient funding. Second, in the space came a surplus materials area and a community person who had kept the space open for teachers two afternoons and evenings a week since January. This activity connected the center with the business community, which donated the surplus materials. Now a mutually beneficial working relationship is being formed. The center can provide a vehicle for "World of Work" in-service for teachers in return for business' facilitation of the center's collection of surplus materials.

### How Can We Keep It Here?

A current budget crisis caused the hoped-for position of the teacher staff person to disappear. The other position and that of the craft/construction/surplus materials person have been secured as of this writing after the teachers, administrators, and staff met, wrote, and worked to confirm the money. This joint effort and the beginning alliance with the business community offer hope for ensuring funding in the next year. The Advisory Group is working on strategies for funding and budget decision making both within the professional organizations and through public relations. *They* have invited the new superintendent to see *their* center and to tell her the impact it has had in their classrooms.

Our "teacher center consultant," the British Headmaster, cautioned us in 1971, "Don't give away the pearl before it is formed." Having the Oakland teachers take the pearl in their hands and carry on the fight to keep it intact has shown that it was not too early to take the pearl to Oakland.

Future episodes of this case study remain to be seen. We are hopeful that the mutual trust and effort of teachers, administrators, and staff will bring about successful efforts to keep the center growing. The details of the case study so far have been recounted to illustrate the importance of day-to-day decisions in the growth of an alternative way of dealing with common concerns. What is decided today determines the tomorrow of a teachers center. □

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