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Invention and Reciprocity: The GECO Program

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Invention and Reciprocity: Teacher Development in the Gonzaga ESL Community Outreach (GECO) Program

Sarah Griffith, Sara Hanson-Lynn, Andrea Hayes, James Hunter, Mary Jeannot, & Analee Scott

Summary: The Gonzaga ESL Community Outreach (GECO), a free, weekly ESL program administered and taught by MA/TESOL students, has become an integral part of teacher development, allowing for creativity and invention in all aspects of teaching and teacher-training. This article documents history, structure, and core features of GECO, such as cascading mentorship and the deliberately blurred line between "student" and "teacher".

Keywords: course planning, teaching approach, task-based teaching, assessment.

Introduction

We did not give birth to ourselves…

Since its inception in 1999, the MA/TESOL Program at Gonzaga University has prioritized the integration of theory and practice as well as meaningful, creative, and sustainable cross-linguistic and cultural activity. It has been part of the program philosophy to consider faculty and students to be co-inventors of a community and co-inventors of our practice, which consists of students, teachers, researchers, and scholars. This framework aligns field and classroom experiences, graduate assistantships, theses, and master's projects to benefit not only students' professional development, but also the viability of the TESOL program. While students collaborate with others who have a common background (they have taken similar courses and have had similar experiences in the program; they have become friends with each other and colleagues with their professors), each student has her unique cultural and linguistic foundations; and each student has also had different "conversations" with others (dead and alive). As such, at the heart of our work and indeed at the heart of any teaching/learning context, is the concept of invention, which Karen Burke Lefevre (1987) has characterized as a collaborative "social act." Invention as a practice blurs the distinctions between the "individual" and the "social," ideas that cannot be easily delineated because they are interrelated and mutually co-defining. Even though our students gain experience and credit for their ideas and their labor, they also bear in mind that they are not the sole owners of the GECO invention; they/we are both recipients and contributors.

With this humble orientation in mind, and a tradition of invention to support it, the MA/TESOL Program's Gonzaga English Community Outreach (GECO) emerged in 2012. This article documents that story.

The evolution of the GECO program

The Gonzaga ESL Community Outreach program (GECO) was the initiative of two MA/TESOL students, David Youngchul Clark and Zach Wegner, who communicated a shared frustration that despite the many field experiences and observation-based assignments required in their courses, the opportunity

Sarah Griffith, one of the authors, introducing the GECO program (click the image to watch)

to gain practical teaching experience was largely limited to the semester-long teaching practicum which candidates usually take in their second year. Using the [Gonzaga/Spokane Public Schools Summer Language Program](#) as a model, they suggested offering a free community ESL course, to be overseen by MA/TESOL faculty, to address this gap. The MA program had the infrastructure to support the initiative, being located in a building dedicated to the Intensive English and MA/TESOL programs, with plenty of classroom space that was unused outside of IEP hours. But there were other considerations: It was important not to compete for students with the ABE-ESL program offered by our local community colleges; we agreed that we had to commit to sustaining the program once it was launched, which would be challenging if it was staffed on a purely voluntary basis; and we agreed that faculty (who all taught full-time in both programs - see Hunter, 2022) would simply not have the time and energy to administer the program. The solution we came up with was for David and Zach to coordinate the program and for faculty to provide support in the form of observation and mentorship. Faculty and students agreed that the purpose was not to be evaluative, and to tie MA/TESOL course assignments to the GECO context where possible.

It quickly became clear that a voluntary teaching roster would not work beyond the initial novelty of the program (which started with more student-teachers than students!) and, in consultation with the MA/TESOL student body, we agreed that there should be a minimum GECO teaching requirement of four times per semester to ensure teaching coverage. It was also agreed that, where possible, the class should be taught by pairs of student-teachers to build confidence and allow for more individual attention for the learners.

For several years the program functioned with relatively few changes. It was small with a loose structure and no organized method of transitioning the program to the next group of student-teachers. Each semester, a new graduate student was appointed to the role of coordinator. The responsibilities of the coordinator included arranging teachers, welcoming students, and developing the program. From 2012 to 2017, several students held the position of coordinator, instituting their policies and shaping the program. However, with little information passed down, a common approach by successive program leaders was to try to 'get back' to how it was at the start. They tried to replicate what had been done in the past, but oftentimes good innovations (such as an initial needs analysis for new GECO students) were lost and mistakes were repeated as past materials, promotions, and ideas had been forgotten or were inaccessible on password-protected cloud drives.

Possibly for these reasons, the GECO program faltered. By late 2015 it was clear that the program would need to be structurally redesigned if it were to survive. The new coordinator, for the first time compensated with graduate assistantship funds, was left with the general concept and a desire to resurrect the program, but the responsibility of restarting the program was daunting since many of the people involved in its creation had long since graduated. However, it was only when the program looked set to fail that the idea of replication was replaced with invention. In the end, the redesign and sustainability of GECO ultimately came not from any single change but rather from consistent messaging to each new coordinator that invention is encouraged and that
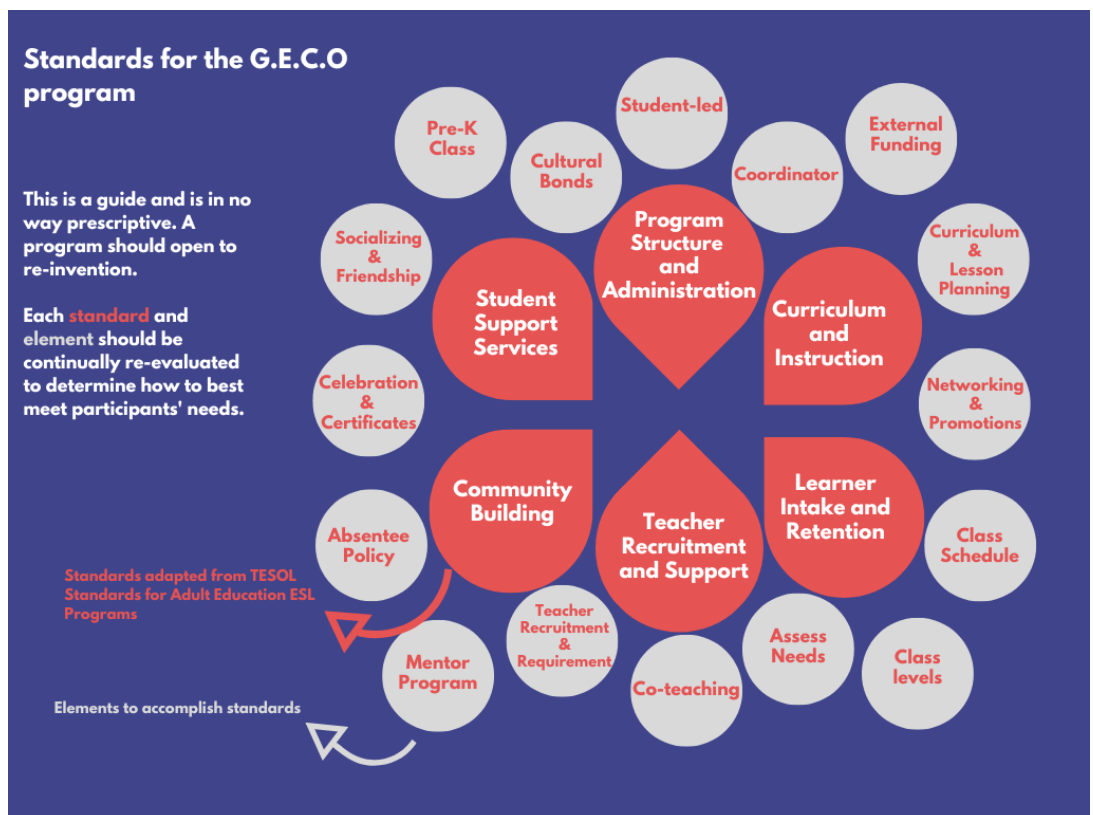
Standards and components of the GECO program, by Sarah Griffith

they are trusted as professionals. This was made possible because of the TESOL program's philosophy of co-creation. Without that trust in graduate students as professionals, and without the encouragement for invention, the status quo of GECO would have likely remained.

Since then, each new coordinator has been explicitly encouraged to treat the program as an organism that is continually evolving and open to invention. In fact, the invention of the program could be jeopardized if future coordinators were given a strict guideline and felt obligated to adhere to it, something which became particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, a successful program should have core standards to guide decision-making, but be flexible for re-invention and have leaders who are reflective, examining what works and what doesn't, in conversation with other MA/TESOL students and faculty. And so in 2017, documentation that framed the structure of cascading mentorship was created along with a method for training new coordinators. The idea for an assistant coordinator role grew out of conversation with MA/TESOL faculty about the past struggles with keeping the program's momentum and transitioning leadership effectively. During the transition period, assistant coordinators try new ideas and program changes, re-invent the program, and still have the experienced coordinator nearby to assist if needed. By the end of the transition period, the assistant coordinators have a clearer understanding of the program standards and areas they want to improve moving forward.

How GECO works

Today, GECO is a free adult English class with three class levels that takes place for two hours every Saturday morning. Students can attend as much or as little as they like, although attendance hours are noted and reflected in the certificate participants receive at the end of each semester. When in-person, GECO aims to partner with tutoring and preschool/childcare programs so that parents have free child-care on-site while they attend class. GECO classes are taught by undergraduate and graduate students at GU in need of teaching hours/experience.

Each session starts with all participants gathered for coffee, snacks, welcomes and introductions, and a whole-group warm-up activity. Students then split up into class levels A (beginner), B (intermediate) and C (advanced), depending equally on each student's a) needs assessment and b) personal preference. The 15-minute all-group opening is followed by a 45-minute class session, a midway 15-minute coffee/snack/social break, then another 45-minute class session. Ideally, each class has two student-teachers, one mentor, and a volunteer or two if available. Class sizes range from just a few participants to 20 or 25, depending on the level and day. Student-teachers have to adapt their lesson plans and activities in real time depending on who shows up to their class.

The GECO program thus serves as a site of experiential education, bridging theory with practice (Verducci & Pope, 2001), and allowing pre-service teachers to recognize the vast differences between idealized versions of a classroom and the realities (Farrell, 2001 as cited in Kanno & Stuart, 2011). For language teachers, community-engaged learning has the potential to prepare student-teachers "for the linguistic and cultural complexity of their future classrooms" (Palpacuer-Lee et al. 2018, p. 4). However, the community-based program does not place the university in the role of experts, and neither do leaders "assume the community has a deficit that the resource or expertise of the university can help alleviate" (d'Arlach, Sanchez, & Feuer, 2009, p. 13). Instead, the community has become a source of reciprocal, collaborative education, with multiple participants contributing on multiple levels.

Participant Roles

The key participant groups in GECO are students, student-teachers, volunteers, mentors and coordinators. Each of these groups plays a key role in the GECO ecosystem, as explained group by group below.

Analee Scott (L), one of the authors, teaching in GECO

Students

GECO students are adult English learners in the community looking for free, flexible English language classes. In GECO's local context, these learners are typically immigrants and refugees, and they learn about GECO through advertisements at local community colleges and their children's schools. Students complete a needs assessment with the coordinator on their first day to gauge their skill level, interests, and goals. Most frequently, the reasons students have given for wanting to improve their English are to communicate better in the community, especially with doctors and children's teachers, as well as enhanced career prospects.

Student-teachers

Student-teachers typically sign up in pairs to teach one themed unit (two consecutive Saturday class sessions, two hours each) for one of the three class levels. They work with each other and a mentor to build two cohesive, level-appropriate lessons related to the theme. Student-teachers range from undergraduate students in the TESOL Certificate, Teacher Certification, Modern Language programs, etc. to graduate students in the MA/TESOL or Master's in Teaching program.

Volunteers

Volunteers are undergraduate, graduate, and international students across a range of disciplines at the university that have some interest in multicultural, multilingual, and/or international community spaces. For example, they may be looking to student-teach at GECO in the future, connect with international communities, or hold informal interviews with students for a class project. Volunteers take direction from their class level's student-teachers, often helping run small group work, modeling activities, and connecting with students in general.
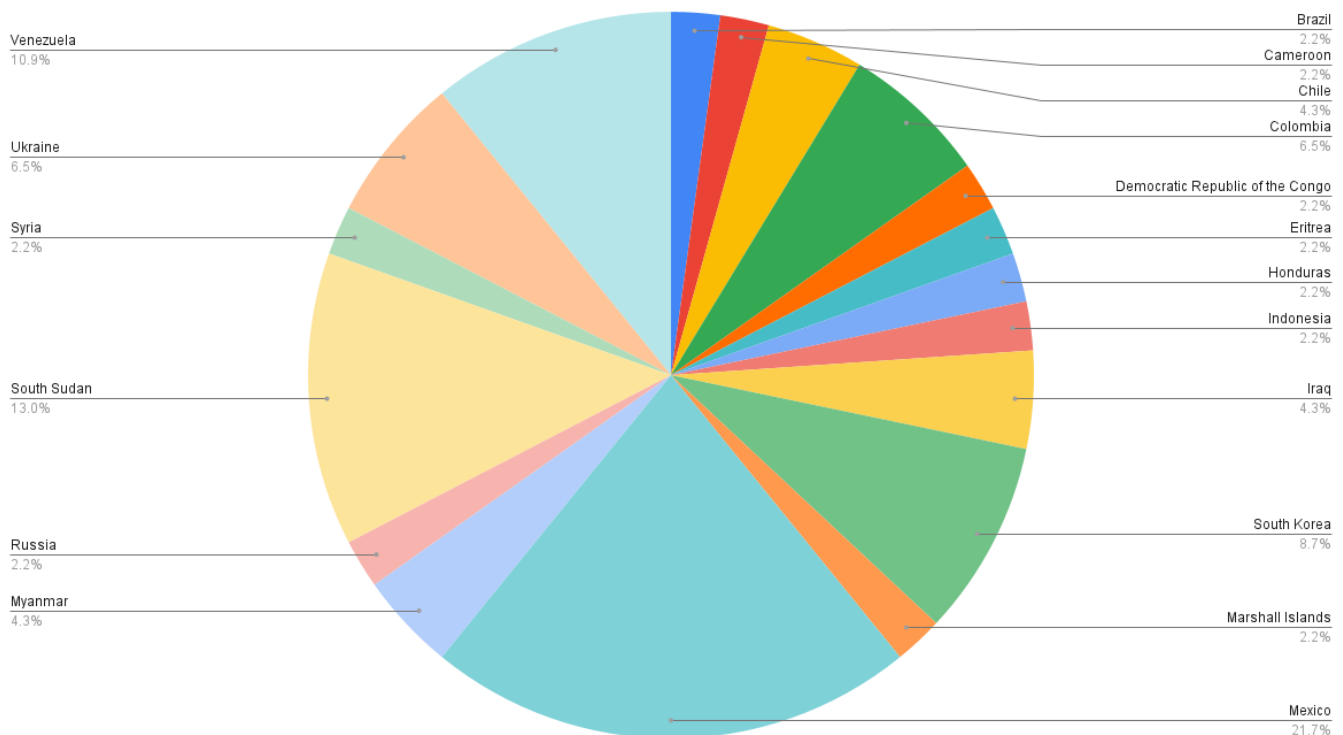
Mentors

Mentors are MA/TESOL graduate students in year two or higher, MA/TESOL alumni, and ESL and MA/TESOL faculty. This pool of senior students and teachers sign up to mentor at least one student-teacher pair, guiding them in materials creation, teaching execution, and reflection. Mentors draw on not only their practical teaching experience but also their specific awareness of how GECO operates and what community demographics it serves.

Coordinator(s)

The GECO coordinator and assistant coordinator organize and facilitate all logistics and communications for the program. They create and manage sign-ups, coordinate volunteers and mentors, advertise GECO in relevant university courses and out in the community, set up and take down the classroom space, and track student hours for completion certificates. Coordinators have also written grant proposals to

Home countries of GECO students, 2020-22

Country	%
Venezuela	10.9%
Ukraine	6.5%
Syria	2.2%
South Sudan	13.0%
Russia	2.2%
Myanmar	4.3%
Brazil	2.2%
Cameroon	2.2%
Chile	4.3%
Colombia	6.5%
Democratic Republic of the Congo	2.2%
Eritrea	2.2%
Honduras	2.2%
Indonesia	2.2%
Iraq	4.3%
South Korea	8.7%
Marshall Islands	2.2%
Mexico	21.7%

Each semester, 20-50 GECO students attend the program; 80% reside in WA.

secure GECO funding; translated GECO documents and communications into students' languages; and conducted language and culture research with GECO students and student-teachers.

Pandemic Transition

Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, Gonzaga University transitioned to remote classes during the 2020 Spring semester. While returning to face-to-face classes is still the goal, since July 2020 GECO classes have been taught in a synchronous format via Zoom. This has allowed the program to continue without interruption as COVID cases fluctuate in the community. While online classes present some difficulties for students, including lack of access to, or the skills to navigate technology, many students have commented on the convenience and flexibility of attending an online class.

Moving classes online also brought new possibilities. Many GU volunteers returned home when Gonzaga began online classes, and because of the online format, these students were able to continue volunteering in GECO classes from across the country. Also, GECO students were able to attend from wherever they found themselves on a Saturday morning. In addition, enrollment was opened to students from outside of Spokane, and now the GECO program has students from cities around the U.S. and even other countries, including Indonesia, Mexico, and Colombia. This has allowed for dynamic classrooms, teacher-student exchanges, and new collaborations, for example, with a group of English teachers from Ecuador. Participants have generally felt so positive about the experience that we are now considering

offering GECO in a hybrid format once face-to-face teaching resumes.

Participant Perspectives

While participants may come to GECO for a variety of reasons, we have found that reciprocity emerges as a common theme among participant perspectives. Each has a key role to play in the success of the program and also reports the benefit of learning.

Student Perspective

Each semester, a needs assessment on learning needs and preferred topics of study is given on Day 1 that shapes GECO's curriculum for that semester and informs the units, but needs assessments are given throughout the semester whenever new students join. Students are thus encouraged to take ownership in the class curriculum and in their learning process. The class schedule for the semester is then organized thematically, based on what students have expressed as meaningful. In response to specific requests, the coordinator or student-teachers may offer special workshops that provide more in-depth discussion on a particular subject. For instance, an interviewing skills workshop was held which covered job-related lexicon and cultural norms, and gave students the chance to ask and answer interview questions. Workshops also provide a learning opportunity for the coordinator or student-teachers to practice designing curriculum based upon the types of skills students will need.

Unlike a traditional classroom, the students don't have the same teacher for the whole semester. The students are the stable factor, with the teachers

Fliers advertising the GECO program, by Sara Hanson-Lynn and Hailey Herrington

coming in and out of the program. This results in an unconventional formula where the students are often more familiar with class procedures and practices than their teachers. Though teachers have the coordinator to guide them, often students take on leadership roles, including welcoming new students and building camaraderie. At the end of the semester, a celebration is held to acknowledge and thank GECO students and student-teachers for participating in the program. During this event, GECO students receive a certificate of achievement which indicates the number of hours they attended classes. Some students have shared that the certificate is beneficial when presented to their employer, as it demonstrates continued education in English.

Student voices

The comments in these sections are translated to English or taken verbatim from informal interviews and surveys of GECO participants conducted by the GECO Coordinators over the past five years.

"I appreciate that you can teach to me even I don't live in usa but a like to know amazing people and with different cultures."

"I congratulate you for having a good program like GECO that helps people who want to learn the language of this country, to achieve their goals."

"[My classmates] were very kind and share they experiences with all the group, this help me to be more confident a speak about my own self. Having the opportunity to speak was amazing, it's a good peactice to improve the speaking skill."

"[The volunteers] are energetic, for they like what they do that makes the difference."

Student-teacher Perspective

Participating in GECO improves career opportunities not just for students, but for student-teachers. No matter their academic level or professional goals, student-teachers gain widely applicable resume-builders and professional development: real-life teaching experience, practical experience using instructional technology, collaboration with diverse teams, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication, and mentorship of classroom volunteers. For many student-teachers, GECO is their first experience teaching and the skills they gain prepare them for their semester-long practicum in year two. Furthermore, because GECO lacks strict teaching parameters (set curriculum, testing, grading, etc.), student-teachers have the freedom to tailor their content and methods to what will serve their development and goals.

Not surprisingly, student-teachers cite teaching experience as the top benefit to participating in GECO. Several have also mentioned the atmosphere

of independence, without a supervising practicum teacher, that made the experience more rewarding. One commented: "It helped me practice my teaching philosophy and beliefs in my own classroom without feeling stressed."

Student-teacher voices

"[Having a mentor] was super productive , we received the best advices ever and we applied those the next class and we could see the difference . Sometimes, it is good that someone outside the classroom help with their opinion. Sometimes, we need friendly reminder of some techniques that we learned but we forgot."

"Having the opportunity to shadow a peer both accelerated and supported my learning process in preparing me to serve as coordinator and grow as a teacher."

"[GECO] gives MA/TESOL students the opportunity to manage a real classroom in a real situation. I could practice many things that I have been learning in the program because of that. My creativity increased and also, my teacher skills and confidence as a person."

Volunteer Perspective

Consistent with every other GECO role, volunteers occupy the space of both teacher and learner when attending GECO. Students automatically see and engage with volunteers as additional English resources (teachers) while student-teachers guide and direct volunteer engagement with the class according to the curriculum they have prepared (learners). Many volunteers experience the global community of their college town beyond their campus' perimeter for the first time at GECO. Their views of "social justice" and "engaging across difference" as things people go out and do in other cities, states, or countries – these views are reoriented to their own locality. Whatever their interests, volunteers are able to apply GECO's lens – multicultural, multigenerational, organic, community-centered, evolutionary – and see their context of business, education, science, art, etc. in the ways most important to our increasingly transnational world.

Volunteer Voices

"The volunteers were a big help through this classes. It is difficult to management a large number of students with out an extra help."

"The experience working with adults was so fascinating. I really appreciated the grounding and the understanding of the importance of working with the parents of my future students."

Mentor Perspective

A critical layer of professional development and network building comes from the support of GECO mentors. These mentors are not solely teachers

GECO students, teachers, mentors, volunteers and coordinators

but learners and community builders themselves throughout the mentorship experience. For those who are not active teacher-trainers, the feedback and observation process allows them to pause and reflect on their own teaching philosophies, strategies, and tendencies. For those who are not consistently engaged with the off-campus (and with Zoom, the global) community that GECO brings together, the GECO classroom fosters (re)connection with the educational contexts and social justice needs beyond the campus bubble. And for those who are open to learning from the "less experienced," a new technology or method will surely emerge that they can then incorporate into their own teaching.

Mentor Voices

"I was invited back to GECO as a mentor after graduating from the MA/TESOL program in 2020, which meant it had transitioned online because of the pandemic. I walked away with (or rather, logged off with) practical ways to foster connection-building in a virtual teaching and learning space that I hadn't thought of or seen before, but were more important than ever in the global teaching context."

"Being a mentor has helped me to focus my feedback on the essential; GECO also has a particular philosophy, reflected in the mentor guide, that has helped me to allow the [student-teachers] to learn what they need to learn, and not to push my own agenda."

Coordinator Perspective

The coordinator role is an exceptional opportunity for leadership amongst a distinct array of individuals: peer graduate students and alum, university faculty, immigrants and refugees in the community, student volunteers, community stakeholders, and global partners. These endeavors have bolstered resumes and enriched graduate and post-graduate work for coordinators in substantial ways. For example, one coordinator used data collected in GECO for their first publication shortly after completing the MA/TESOL program (Scott, 2022). In another case, the coordinator has become involved in local immigrant and refugee organizations, attending meetings and networking with other programs. Across coordinator experiences, the need for invention and adaptability remains consistent. As student, teacher, community, and global contexts fluctuate, and as language, technology, and politics constantly shift, coordinators strive to maintain the richness and connectedness of GECO while finding ways to expand and progress. The world today is decidedly different than it was five years ago, let alone ten years ago when GECO started. Thanks to the creativity and (re)imagination of coordinators and their partners, the program has illustrated the importance of invention with regard to communities of practice, language teaching and learning, and connection across differences.

Conclusion

The GECO program took six years to become a coherent, self-reliant space for the kind of collaborative, inventive, and supportive teacher development that we describe above. Reflecting on what has made it successful leads us to recognize several core features that we believe would be essential for any teacher-training program wishing to establish a similar model. The first is structural consistency: having a coordinator who oversees the program and who is responsible for making sure certain things happen is essential. The second is the praxis of 'cascading mentorship' (Golde et al., 2006), whereby every participant is allowed and encouraged to play the role of novice and experienced peer, concurrently or consecutively. Third is the "atmosphere of independence" described above; the ability to develop one's teaching style and philosophy without the pressure of observation and critique from faculty, unsupervised but not unsupported. Fourth, conversely, it is important that novice teachers not be "thrown in the deep end," and so the model of collaborative teaching teams seems to us to be essential. Fifth, and perhaps most important, is the prioritization of benefit for all participants and the continual striving for "knowledge to be local and co-created with (rather than for) the community" (d'Arlach et al. 2009, p. 5). These core features of GECO blur the lines between "us" and "them," foreign and familiar, expert and novice. Blurring and reinventing these lines has shown us that difference and distance are not barriers but the richest of opportunities for bridge-building, learning, and connection within our field of education and beyond.

Conference presentation by Sarah Griffith, one of the authors, and GECO participants

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