English Teachers’ Online Participation as Professional Development: A Narrative Study

Luke Rodesiler and Barbara G. Pace

This article presents research from a qualitative study investigating five secondary English teachers’ experiences participating online (via blogs, microblogs, and social network sites) in exploration of teaching, learning, and literacy. With narratives from collected interview data, the authors conducted a thematic analysis to identify common patterns and a structural analysis to underscore the narrative content. Participants constructed narratives that revealed several themes, including those addressing shifts in their teaching practices, their sense of isolation, and their identities as writers. This study stands to support more nuanced understandings of teachers’ efforts to supplement their professional growth by creating new content on the Web and engaging in active dialogue online with distant colleagues.

Sarah, a high school English teacher in the midwestern United States, is a blogger. Writing primarily about young adult literature on her blog Y.A. Love (http://yaloveblog.com), Sarah posts reviews of books she and students in her classroom have read, previews of forthcoming releases, interviews students have conducted with published authors, and details about her efforts to promote reading among adolescents. For example, addressing fellow English teachers, Sarah wrote a blog post offering insights into her practice of reading aloud to high school students:

I tried my first read aloud while student teaching. I had a few sophomore English classes, so I decided on Shattering Glass by Gail Giles. It’s an edgy book, and there’s some bad language and mature situations, but it’s an excellent pick for reluctant readers. I was nervous about reading this during student teaching, but I went ahead and did it anyway. I had a rationale prepared and everything. My students loved it and often asked me to read “just one more chapter.” Since then I’m much more comfortable reading books where characters swear, but I make sure to choose books that aren’t over the top in that category. It sometimes shocks my students to hear me...
read those parts, but we have a conversation about why that language is in the book and how we won’t be using that language in class.

As Sarah continued the blog post, she explained the qualities she looks for in a read-aloud (e.g., amount of dialogue, short chapters, entertainment value). She then highlighted the read-alouds students in her classroom have enjoyed most, including Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson, Boy21 by Matthew Quick, and Hex Hall by Rachel Hawkins, and addressed why the books were so well received. As depicted in the excerpt above, Sarah often draws from her own experiences as an English teacher—sharing struggles and successes, offering ideas and inspiration—when blogging about pedagogical issues.

Sarah also microblogs via Twitter, an online platform that limits each post or tweet to 140 characters. After blogging about reading aloud to high school students, Sarah wrote the following tweet to broadcast the post’s corresponding URL: “Every day at the beginning of class I read a book aloud to my students. These are my faves http://t.co/cvIoypRs.” Not addressed to anyone specifically, Sarah’s tweet drew responses from multiple teachers. The following excerpt captures a synchronous Twitter exchange between Sarah and a respondent identified with the pseudonym “Humanities Teacher” and the corresponding “@humanitiesteacher” Twitter handle, also a pseudonym:

HUMANITIES TEACHER: @Sarah . . . Sarah, I used to do RAs and now they just ignore me and read their own books, even on World ReadAloudDay! Thoughts?

SARAH: @humanitiesteacher . . . I’ve noticed some of my kids doing the same thing. I usually let it slide b/c they may not enjoy the book I read.

SARAH: @humanitiesteacher . . . You could always try the “book parking lot” idea during your read aloud . . .

HUMANITIES TEACHER: @Sarah . . . So do you still have time for independent reading in-class every day?

SARAH: @humanitiesteacher . . . Not every day :( We have SSR Mon/ Weds/Fri but I sometimes squeeze time in every day.

Through this interactive online episode and dozens of others that were collected as one phase of a larger study, we became familiar with Sarah and four other English teachers who were engaging in what we identify as teachers’ professionally oriented participation online. This participation includes not only creating new content on the Web to explore issues at the heart of teachers’ professional work (i.e., teaching, learning, and literacy)
but also engaging in active dialogue with professional peers about matters related to education.

The teachers we followed, like Sarah, created content by leveraging the affordances of online technologies to create multimodal texts that consisted of videos, images, alphabetic text, and so on. They also used online technologies to support both synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication with their distant peers.

To learn more about the material contexts these teachers created and how they participated in online activities, archival data generated over 10 months were collected from the sites of their online participation. Ethnographic analyses of these data revealed that teachers took advantage of the design options of online technologies. They drew on multiple semiotic systems to create texts and on various forms of social media to spark interactions with other educators. Analysis of content across the sites of their participation revealed a focus on teaching the English language arts, on fostering relationships with teachers online, and on providing a sense of levity (Rodesiler, 2014).

While we recognize that contexts are fluid and are understood in multiple ways by those who participate in a setting, identifying the features of the contexts these teachers weaved online and the nature of their online activities was a foundational component of a larger investigation of online professional development. However, it did not reveal how these teachers experience such contexts and their online participation or what, if anything, they gained from that work.

As English teacher educators engaged in preservice teacher education and inservice professional development, we wondered how these teachers’ experiences might help us understand what it means to teach English at a time when new communication technologies have expanded opportunities for online, self-selected professional development. We also wondered if gathering more information about these teachers’ thinking and about their motives might help us consider how to move prospective teachers beyond a view of the Web as a reservoir of lesson plans and WebQuests. Below we present our investigation, which was guided by the following research question: *How do selected secondary English teachers experience professionally oriented participation online and what, if anything, do they gain from the experience?*

**Theoretical Framing**

In the current study, our aim was to investigate how five English teachers with a robust online presence experienced their online participation and
to learn what, if anything, they gained from their experiences. This project was framed by our understanding that participation is mediated by the ways that individuals understand context, the material goods and cultural artifacts available, the social practices that turn group attention this way or that, and the histories of individual participants. From this view, an understanding of how these teachers situated themselves in online contexts was an important part of identifying the ways that online participation might foster professional development and enhanced understandings of literacy and teaching. To gain insight into these teachers’ experiences, we drew on the narratives they shared in a series of formal interviews.

Our decision to collect narratives from participating teachers was based on the role that narrative plays in organizing human experience (Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988). It is through the development of narrative that individuals make connections among episodes to create cohesive understandings of their experiences. Polkinghorne (1988) asserted that in the process of forming narratives, an individual “organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole” (p. 18).

In the act of forming narratives, individuals present a hierarchy of experience that reflects the significance that the included events hold for them or that reflects the meaning that they aim for others to take from the narrative. Individuals select episodes to share and they construct relationships among these episodes. During this process individuals display a sense of how events are valued and incorporated into a cohesive experience that they hold or that they present to an audience. We reasoned that in the process of narrativizing their online experiences, participating teachers would provide insight into what they valued and what they found troubling in the online contexts and provide us with an opportunity to “access motivation, emotion, imagination, subjectivity, and action” (Laslett, 1999, p. 392). Thus the narratives allowed for the close study of personal experience (Riessman, 2003) and provided an opportunity to understand that experience.

Our focus on teachers’ professionally oriented participation online was framed by calls in recent years for teachers to use the Web to advance their professional growth. Lieberman and Pointer Mace (2010) asserted that teachers can benefit from sharing their practices with one another online. They argued that making teaching practices public and sharing student-generated products places teachers at the center of professional development, opening them up “to critique, to learning, and to expanding their repertoire” (p. 86). Likewise, while advocating for meaningful technology integration in the ELA classroom, Hicks and Turner (2013) called for
teachers to develop their digital literacies by participating online, blogging, microblogging, and engaging others in social network sites. They posited that by participating online, teachers can cultivate knowledge while enhancing their facility with digital writing and preparing to teach students the craft of writing online. Such calls align with selected research studies that have documented teachers advancing their professional growth by participating online in various ways.

Swenson (2003) investigated an organized network of teachers using an electronic discussion list to engage one another and exchange ideas. She found that the information shared and ideas exchanged online became transformative in terms of improved teacher practice and empowerment when the knowledge was gained “at the point of need” (p. 299). Vavasseur and MacGregor (2008) found that teachers participating in online threaded discussions established for select schools developed enhanced self-efficacy regarding the use of technology in the classroom. Similarly, Luehmann (2008) found that, as a means of professional learning, blogging offered a secondary science teacher numerous opportunities, including engaging in metacognition and developing one’s thinking through discourse with other readers and writers.

Though research suggests the promise of participating online as a vehicle for teachers’ professional development, such research has not focused specifically on the perspectives of English teachers who, of their own volition, participate online across multimedia platforms to create content and to explore teaching, learning, and literacy. In the current study, we aimed to fill that gap by investigating secondary English teachers’ narratives about their professionally oriented, self-directed participation in online environments and building an understanding of their experiences.

**Research Design and Methods**

We began by gaining institutional approval for the project. Then, in keeping with the narrative focus we identified above, we worked collaboratively to examine the narratives generated by selected secondary English teachers with the aim of investigating how they experienced professionally oriented participation online and what, if anything, they gained from the experience.

**Identifying Participants**

Criterion-driven sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to select the study’s participants. These criteria included (a) working as secondary English teachers in face-to-face settings; (b) exploring issues related to teaching, learning, and
literacy in two or more online environments; and (c) claiming membership in a reputable professional organization that has historically informed research and the teaching of English, such as NCTE or the National Writing Project. The first two criteria were necessary, given the guiding research question. The third criterion, though not foolproof, was intended to ensure a degree of quality regarding the teaching practices prospective participants might share online. Presumably, the professional literature would inform the practices of a teacher affiliated with a professional organization.

With criteria established, Luke started tracking “digital footprints” (Richardson, 2008, p. 16) to identify individuals who met the criteria. This entailed reviewing the digital content of English teachers in his own network to get a sense of “who [they] are, what [they] do, and by association, what [they] know” (Richardson, 2008, p. 16). Sifting through the networks of individuals in his network provided snowball sampling (Patton, 2002) that helped us identify others who met the participant criteria.

Eight English teachers were invited via email to take part in the study, and five teachers agreed to participate. Participants were given the option of creating pseudonyms, but all declined. Information about each participant is presented in Table 1. Finally, we must note that we had no personal or professional relationship with participants prior to the study.

### Collecting Data

To explore the guiding research question, semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection. Online artifacts generated by participating teachers—such as the blog post and tweets cited at the beginning of this article—were also collected and used to inform the interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Exp.</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Blog</th>
<th>SNS</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>Site</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meenoo</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>MEd</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11 &amp; 12</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>NE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>MEd</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>MEd</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9 &amp; 12</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>NE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10–12</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>MW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9–12</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>MW</td>
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Note: F = Female; M = Male; MEd = Master of Education; MA = Master of Arts; BA = Bachelor of Arts; Exp. = Teaching Experience (in years); Grade = Grade Level(s) Taught at the Time; Y = Yes; N = No; SNS = Social Network Site; NE = Northeastern United States; MW = Midwestern United States. The information in this table reflects the status of participants at the time of the study.
protocol. Recognizing the advantages of face-to-face interviews, including contextual naturalness and equal distribution of interactive power (Shuy, 2003), Luke traveled to destinations chosen by participants and conducted a pair of 60-minute semi-structured interviews with each. With approximately four weeks between the initial and follow-up interviews, Luke reviewed and transcribed the audio recordings of the initial interviews and participants reviewed the transcripts as part of the member-checking process (Hatch, 2002). During the interviews, longer turns for participant talk were planned to encourage the participants to generate responses in ways they found meaningful.

Identifying Narratives

Two decisions we had to make as we elected to take a narrative approach to this study were how to define narrative and how to bracket narratives within the interview data. Though there are multiple definitions of narrative, in Western society a narrative is widely viewed by researchers as the representation of information as a sequence of events that are temporally and spatially organized (e.g., Herman, 2009; Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Lacey, 2000; Prince, 1982; Riessman, 2003).

An early proponent of narrative research, William Labov (1972), theorized that “a fully-formed narrative” (p. 565) includes the following elements: (a) an abstract that serves as a brief summary or presents the narrative’s main point; (b) an orientation that clarifies the time, place, people, and situation; (c) a complicating action that often involves a turning point or problem; (d) an evaluation that provides a commentary on meaning; (e) a resolution that explains the outcome of the plot or a solution to the problem; and (f) a coda that states general observations and returns the narrative to the present time. Labov’s structural elements have served as guideposts in narrative studies conducted in the social sciences (e.g., Flora, 2012; Moore, 2006). However, as researchers and as students of literature, we recognize Cazden’s (1998) point that there are many ways to tell a story and that some narratives do not come together in a tidy fashion, complete from beginning to end with all disruptions resolved (Ochs & Capps, 2001).

To address the variety of responses that participants offered and to ensure that we had ample data for analysis, we developed baseline criteria for identifying narratives. Each narrative included, at minimum, (a) a representation of a complication that was comprised of at least two connected, temporally and spatially ordered sequential events; (b) a reaction or, in Labovian terms, an evaluation of the complication; and (c) relevance to
secondary English teachers’ online participation related to the exploration of teaching, learning, and literacy. These features distinguished narratives from other interview data, illustrated that participants were narrativizing their experiences, and prevented irrelevant narratives from entering the final data set.

Once these criteria were established, the process of identifying narrative data embedded in the interviews ensued. Interview segments that met the three criteria described above were classified as narratives and were gathered for additional analysis. At that point, we began a narrative inventory by documenting the prompt that elicited the narrative, the narrator, topics addressed, adherence to the narrative criteria, and additional notes (e.g., references to other narratives), as appropriate (see Table 2). Cataloging the narratives gave us a greater understanding of the data, helping us distinguish between those narratives that, to the highest degree, offered contextual details and appeared likely to support investigation of the guiding research question and those narratives that were lacking details and only

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Prompt</th>
<th>Participant &amp; Title (in vivo)</th>
<th>Topic(s) Addressed</th>
<th>Narrative Criteria</th>
<th>Additional Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How does [onsite PD from your district] compare to [your online experience]?</td>
<td>Sarah (2.2): If I have a specific need</td>
<td>Turning to others online for help teaching the concept of allusion</td>
<td>Though quite brief, CA and E are evident; relevant to the research</td>
<td>Very brief narrative; offers specific instance of turning to others for help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you talk a little bit about [offering support to others online]?</td>
<td>Gary (1.2): I hope I have some things to offer</td>
<td>Desire to help; bringing department chair experience to online environment</td>
<td>CA and E are evident; relevant to the research</td>
<td>Brings to mind Gary (1.5), also about leadership qualities not flourishing onsite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was it about that conversation that sparked this change?</td>
<td>Brian (1.5): I felt comfortable enough to come back and talk to my kids about it</td>
<td>Authenticating with students in the classroom ideas discussed online</td>
<td>CA and E are evident; plainly relevant to the research</td>
<td>Follow-up to Brian (1.4), about how online participation has informed his practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you participate online?</td>
<td>Cindy (2.12): If I hadn’t had those few interactions in the beginning</td>
<td>Importance of initial encounters online; surprise at others responding to her</td>
<td>Heavy on the E; CA is evident; plainly relevant to the research</td>
<td>Speaks to the importance of initial interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can you talk a little bit about [sharing student work online]?</td>
<td>Meenoo (1.12): There was no curtain</td>
<td>Exposing her practice online; accepting mistakes; becoming fearless</td>
<td>Though brief, CA is evident; E is evident; relevant to the research</td>
<td>Ties into Meenoo (1.11); reveals how making practice public informed her practice</td>
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tangentially related to the guiding research question. In sum, 149 narratives were identified across the 10 interviews. These data were analyzed thematically and structurally.

Analyzing Data

A thematic approach is suited for narratives that develop in the context of interviews (Riessman, 2008), and this was the case for all of the narratives in the data set. During a thematic analysis, researchers use inductive analysis to focus on the content of data. Through recursive coding (see Table 3) and methods of constant comparison, which have origins in and applicability beyond grounded theory (Boeije, 2002; Fram, 2013), thematic categories emerged across the narratives. Meeting regularly to discuss the analysis of data, we refined these categories based on similarities within and distinctions among the data. Analysis across the narratives of all five participants revealed six emergent themes: (a) finding relief from a sense of isolation; (b) establishing networks of support; (c) informing thinking, shaping practice; (d) positioning oneself as a writer; (e) generating new professional opportunities; and (f) enhancing the capacity to support students.

To embellish understandings of these themes, Luke also analyzed the data through the process of structural analysis. While thematic narrative analysis focuses on the content of speech or what a participant says when constructing a narrative, structural narrative analysis shifts attention to the organization of speech or how a participant constructs a narrative. Combining thematic and structural analysis methods exposes broad patterns of thematic similarities across participants while also recognizing variations in meaning for individual participants.

We revisited the narrative data during structural analysis. Each narrative was read and reread with a focus on its structural elements (i.e., abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution, coda). Revisiting the narratives afforded an additional opportunity to consider the accuracy of early interpretations of the structure noted when creating the narrative inventory. In this phase of data analysis, we replayed the interview recordings to identify audible indicators that signaled a misinterpretation of structural elements in the printed transcripts. Then, we asked a number of questions about each narrative: What structural elements are missing from the narrative? What structural elements are most prominent? How does the structure inform meaning? Why did the participant construct the narrative in this way? Focusing on such questions allowed us to consider the ways participants constructed their narratives and how, if at all, the organization
of structural elements complemented the narrative content and illuminated the narrator’s aims.

**Findings**

In this section we present representative narratives to highlight the six themes that emerged and examine, when possible, how distinct narrative structures reinforced our understanding of participants’ online experiences.

**Finding Relief from a Sense of Isolation**

Teacher isolation has been recognized as a challenge for English teachers (McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). These feelings of isolation may stem from a variety of sources, such as geographical, cultural, social, philosophical,
or psychological differences between teachers’ respective teaching situations and the teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning. In telling the stories of their work online, each participant referenced a sense of isolation and explained how participating online had helped to combat those feelings. To illustrate, we present a narrative Sarah constructed during her initial interview.

**It’s Very Reassuring**

In the narrative that follows, Sarah captured the sense of isolation and self-doubt she felt early in her teaching career and clarified its origin. She opened with an abstract summarizing what she gained from participating online: “[By participating online] I have reassurance that what I’m doing in my classroom—even though it’s different from what the other teachers in my department are doing—is not bad.” Sarah indicated that differences in the pedagogical approaches she and her colleagues embrace factored into her perceived sense of isolation and that her online participation affirmed that her practice, though different from that of her colleagues, was not inferior. With that opening, Sarah set the stage for her narrative’s complication, which explained more fully the source of her self-doubt:

A lot of times before [I started participating online] I would leave the building feeling like I’m a bad teacher because I wasn’t killing my kids with grammar and drill-and-kill exercises . . . there’s a lot of traditional teaching—not that that’s a bad thing—but there’s a lot of traditional teaching in my department, and I’m more of an out-of-the-box thinker—or at least I try to be. I want to be. So I kept thinking, “Wow. Am I not doing what I’m supposed to be doing? Am I leading my kids astray? Are they going to fail the ACT, the state exam? Am I just not preparing them for life?”

With that complication, Sarah offered insight into why she finds reassurance through her online participation. Taking the pedagogical road less traveled has prompted Sarah to question her efficacy as a teacher, and, at times, it has fostered a sense of isolation despite the physical proximity of her onsite colleagues.

As Sarah continued, she explained how, by participating online, she resolved the complication she faced, finding that the seemingly isolated road she took in the classroom was well-traveled after all, for it was populated by her online peers:
And I really would have moments thinking like that, and then I got on Twitter and met other teachers . . . and it was like, “Oh. Oh! Okay! They’re doing the exact same thing I am! And they have even better ideas than what I’ve been doing!”

Here, as Sarah alluded to in the narrative’s abstract, she explained how her online participation and her engagement with other teachers offered reassurances about her pedagogical choices. Sarah described finding strength in numbers. If other English teachers whose work she respects are making independent reading a priority, then perhaps students in her classroom could benefit from that practice as well, or so the thinking goes. With the final line in this narrative segment—“And they have even better ideas than what I’ve been doing!”—Sarah indicated that, in addition to finding assurances about her practice, participating online has positioned her to consider new ideas that may enhance instruction in her classroom.

Continuing the narrative, Sarah offered an evaluation that mirrored the abstract and emphasized the reassurance she has found through her online participation:

And so it’s very reassuring, knowing that I can go there and talk to them and knowing that a lot of them are dealing with the exact same thing that I’m dealing with and they wish that they had someone else in their department who was doing some of those exact same things [in the classroom].

As before, Sarah indicated that she finds comfort in knowing that she is not alone, that she has online peers to whom she can turn and, because some of them are in situations similar to her own, they can turn to her as well.

Sarah concluded the narrative by stressing the comfort she finds through her online participation as she cited past exchanges with her online peers to make her point with this coda:

[Online colleagues and I] have talked a lot about how we wish we could all teach at the same school [laughs] and have like this Twitter dream school. But . . . we know that you want to have teachers spread out and all that. But it’s a reassuring kind of thing, and I’ve just gotten amazing ideas and feedback from them.

Those final remarks—particularly an expressed desire to teach in the same school as those with whom she shares similar views on teaching, learning, and literacy—emphasize the comfort Sarah found in the virtual company of her online peers and the value she placed on shared pedagogical philosophies. Sarah, in closing, reiterated her view on what she gains from participating online; she stressed the reassurance she feels and the ideas and feedback she has received from online peers as prime benefits of her online participation.
Considering this narrative as a whole, it becomes evident that, for Sarah, professionally oriented participation online has offered relief from the self-doubt and isolation she has felt at times due to pedagogical differences that separated her from some of her onsite colleagues. Participating online has helped Sarah connect with others who embrace pedagogical methods that mirror her own, reassuring her that she is not alone in finding merit in instructional approaches that veer away from tradition. Thus, this narrative also serves as an illustration of the ways participating online stands to help teachers connect with peers at a distance, providing alternatives to the colleagues with whom they have not connected onsite.

Establishing Networks of Support

Narratives offered by the five participants in this study indicated that the support they found from others online—support that may transcend the virtual environment—was valued as much as any other benefit. To these select teachers, the relationships they formed with others online served as the foundation of a network of support. To illustrate, we present a narrative Cindy offered during her second interview.

It’s Almost like a Pay-It-Forward Sort of Model

Describing the value of establishing a network of support online, Cindy constructed a narrative about a face-to-face encounter she had with an educator she met online. She opened with a lengthy abstract that captured the supportive nature of the teachers she has come to know on the Web:

I think that Deanna [all names referenced by participants are pseudonyms] happens to be part of this really nifty group of people—I would lump Tara in that group and Phil and most of the people that I’ve met and interacted with at the National Writing Project. They like to see people move forward. They want to . . . nudge you in the right direction and see you succeed. And it’s almost like a pay-it-forward sort of model, from what I understand.

In the abstract above, Cindy introduced what she calls a “pay-it-forward” model, a reference to the concept of individuals repaying a good deed by doing the same for someone else. Cindy’s introduction of that concept set up the action she would go on to recall: “I remember when we were in Florida [for the NCTE Annual Convention] I went to the ALAN breakfast and I was sitting with Phil and Deanna and Marci and a few other people.” The teachers Cindy mentioned are individuals she first came to know online, and they teach in various regions of the United States. In light of the fact that the teachers’ backgrounds are disparate geographically, their presence together
at a professional conference attended by thousands of educators reinforces the way relationships forged online may extend beyond the Web.

After introducing the setting and the characters on the scene, Cindy offered the narrative’s complication by reconstructing a time when one of her online peers, a professor of children’s and young adult literature, introduced her to professionals in the field:

And afterwards Tara came over, and she started introducing me to people. I was like, “Wait a minute. I have his book. Oh my gosh! I have his book! I have her book! Why are you introducing me to these people? I’m not anybody! I haven’t done anything! I teach. That’s it.” And she looked at me and said, “You know, the first time I came to one of these things somebody took me under their wing and started introducing me around. That’s what I’m doing for you.” She was like, “I like to do that. It’s something I can do.” And I’m still sitting there shaking.

Cindy clarified how she came to associate a pay-it-forward model with the actions of her online peers: Someone was thoughtful enough to offer Tara the professional courtesy of introducing her to others in the field, and she reciprocated by doing the same for Cindy, whom she met online. Cindy’s enthusiastic telling and her closing line revealed how much she valued Tara’s thoughtful gesture and the opportunity to meet renowned professionals in the field of English education. Cindy’s take on the experience and her thoughts about her online peers became more evident as she offered this evaluation:

I think that’s really kind of an interesting sort of positive, collaborative sort of thing. I’m sure there are those out there that are just kind of, “I’m not going to share. It’s mine.” But most of the people that I interact with [online] are the ones who want to see you succeed. They want to encourage you to do one thing bigger and better than you did the day before. They’re—they’re teachers. I guess that’s part of it. They don’t understand the concept of not sharing, of not encouraging. That’s what they do. I think it’s neat.

From Cindy’s perspective, as teachers, the individuals with whom she has connected online have a general disposition toward supporting and encouraging one another, toward looking out for each other as they share advice, resources, and experiences.

In the end, Cindy resolved to advance the pay-it-forward cycle she experienced firsthand, declaring firmly, “I fully intend to continue that cycle.” She then concluded the narrative with the following coda: “It’s a culture thing. And it seems like most of the people I’ve interacted with on Twitter who are educators are in that same category.” With that statement, Cindy revealed her recognition of the pay-it-forward habit of her online peers as
more than a mere model. She identified it as a culture within which many educators participate online.

This narrative, like others constructed during the study, recalled the capacity for teachers to forge relationships with other educators by participating online, and it spoke to the potential for those relationships to serve as the foundation for a network of support. Such networks help to sustain teachers in the face of growing demands and feelings of isolation like those described above. As reported elsewhere (Rodesiler, 2014), such support may come in the form of comments offering comfort in response to teachers’ blog posts, tweets offering sentiments of encouragement, and reaffirming responses to discussion forum entries.

It Represented the Very Thing I Was Trying to Get Away From

The notion of establishing networks of support was advanced in narratives by all five participants. However, one narrative highlighted an instance in which the supportive nature of online exchanges was absent. This narrative offered insight into why the collaborative and collegial nature of most online experiences was valuable. Brian shared the contrary experience and his response by opening with a brief orientation: “There was a teacher [on the English Companion Ning] who [seemed] closer to retirement than starting her career.” Brian followed quickly with a passage marked by a uniquely repetitive complication/evaluation pattern:

When she would comment on people’s posts, whether it was about a lesson they taught or asking a question... it was judgmental. Really judgmental. And it represented the very thing I was trying to get away from—collegial judgment doesn’t help anybody. This has little to do with the person... because offensive or defensive venting is probably representative of everyone in education at one time or another. I just didn’t need my time away from the office to be spent immersed in situations identical to what I tried to put behind me for the day.

In the first half of the narrative, Brian oriented his audience to an individual he encountered on a social network site for English teachers. As Brian recalled, the teacher, in response to the inquiries of others, added comments expressing a judgmental tone. Looking to the English Companion Ning (ECN) for judgment-and-argument-free collegiality, Brian grew frustrated with the situation. Continuing the narrative, he extended the complication/evaluation pattern:

And she, um, often incited arguments back and the feeling that I sometimes got when I first started teaching from older teachers: “Oh, you’ll get it.
You’ll learn. You don’t know yet.” And that’s so counterproductive in this, in this business. So it turned me off. And I consciously pulled back. I didn’t comment, and I commented less there, but I still needed that outlet to write.

Brian then wrapped the narrative by offering its resolution, “So I found my blog,” and its coda, “I’m happy.”

In the second half of the narrative, Brian explained that he found the teacher’s presence to be so counterproductive to what he sought to do in the ECN that he stepped back, ceased commenting, and found another outlet: his blog. Over the course of the narrative, Brian took a negative experience—encounters with an abrasive teacher in the ECN—and turned it into a positive one. Brian was content focusing on his writing in what he deemed to be a judgment-free zone while still checking in occasionally on the ECN.

Brian’s narrative was marked by three consecutive shifts between a complication and a corresponding evaluation. The repetitive complication/evaluation pattern is telling, for it was not common to Brian’s narratives. However, in recalling a negative experience, extensive evaluation like that which Brian offered is fitting. Evaluations tend to reveal one’s reactions and feelings about an event and to offer some conjecture, explanation, or interpretation of those feelings (McVee, 2004). In crafting this narrative, Brian found himself interpreting his response to what he perceived to be a negative stimulus. In the midst of an interview that featured reconstructions of many positive online experiences, perhaps the heavy complication/evaluation pattern arose because he felt compelled to explain why the experience was not as positive as other experiences he had shared. Regardless, the coda of Brian’s narrative revealed his contentment in the present day, as he found an outlet for his writing while standing free of the abrasiveness he sought to avoid.

Informing Thinking, Shaping Practice

The five English teachers featured in this study revealed that their online participation also has informed their thinking about teaching, learning, and literacy and, subsequently, shaped their teaching practices. Reportedly, through social, communicative processes online, such as participation in virtual book clubs and asynchronous discussion forums in social network sites, the participants have extended their thinking as it relates to pedagogical matters and altered their teaching practices accordingly. Here, we present representative narratives from Gary and Brian and consider how the distinct structures of their narratives help to convey meaning.
**English Companion Ning Was Doing Some Book Clubs**

One lengthy narrative Gary constructed about participating in an online book club illustrates this finding. Gary opened the narrative with a passage that served as an extended abstract summarizing what would unfold:

> I think when English Companion Ning was doing some book clubs—I’ll single out the Kelly Gallagher *Readicide* book club—it was enormously influential for me. I read that book and I had to plead guilty on every page almost. And that book changed the way I thought about how students learn to read and how schools teach students to read and I learned so much from that online book club, not only from Kelly, but also from other participants who were taking his ideas and doing them in different ways. So, I would say the English Companion Ning book clubs, and the *Readicide* one specifically, were really, really influential for me.

With that summary, Gary clarified the influence he has found his participation in online book clubs to have on his practice. Gary’s summary also established the prominent role his participation in the English Companion Ning’s *Readicide* (Gallagher, 2009) book club, in particular, would have in the narrative he was constructing.

In step with his summary, Gary continued with a subnarrative that, while serving as an orientation in the larger narrative, explained how pedagogical ideas he gained through his participation in the online book club took shape in his classroom:

> One of the tenets of that book is that we over-teach the books and we under-teach the books and that students need about 50 percent. If they’re going to learn to read well, they need about 50 percent of their reading material to be self-chosen and the other 50 percent can be whole class. I was doing 95–99 percent whole-class stuff, so I experimented with a sophomore class. The first 10 minutes of each day was reading whatever book you want . . . . And it’s been enormously successful. Kids are reading all the time. A lot of kids drop out of reading for choice around fourth or fifth grade. So many kids have said, “It’s good to be reading again. It’s good to have books back in my life again.” We talk about books, and we book-talk all the time.

In the subnarrative above, Gary drew a direct line between a concept he encountered through his participation in the online book club—the 50/50 balance between choice and whole-class readings—and his own practice. Gary noted the contrast between Gallagher’s recommended reading breakdown and that which he used in his own classroom, described how he changed his approach thereafter by including independent reading, and reported the success he found as a result, noting students’ positive reactions to the increase in choice reading.
Following that orienting subnarrative, Gary continued the larger narrative by describing the complication: “Before I [participated in the online book club] I did things a certain way. Then I read *Readicide* and participated in that [book club]. Now I do things differently and better.” He followed with a corresponding evaluation, reiterating the way his engagement in an online book club informed his thinking and shaped his practice: “That book helped me see my own practice in a whole new light, and the light wasn’t that favorable.” Gary then launched the start of what would prove to be a lengthy resolution to his narrative:

So I made some changes in terms of how I structure my whole-class and choice reading material. It also started some intra-departmental discussion on similar issues. That discussion was not sustained in any comprehensive way, but after implementing some of the suggestions in *Readicide*, I continue to refine the way those changes are used in my class. So . . . I can put a finger on a concrete example where that improved my practice, not to mention that that book then became the summer reading book for our department.

The resolution Gary offered went beyond the shift he made in his classroom. As he explained it, the book and the corresponding discussion online helped to spark discussions locally. Gary elaborated on the book’s influence in his building by providing a subnarrative that extended his resolution:

I think . . . almost everybody in our department read that book. Several of my colleagues have used aspects of it in their practice, too. I’m not going to say that it all came through me, but it came on my radar through English Companion Ning. When I had that book around, one of my colleagues read it and bought copies for other people, and then it kind of caught fire. It’s been an important book in our English department’s culture. Either me or one of my colleagues gave a copy to our principal, and she read it. You know, she wrote back a little note to me that basically said, “I admire his balanced approach.” So that book went from an [online] book club to inserting its tentacles in our school in a variety of ways.

With the subnarrative above, Gary detailed another result of his experience in the *Readicide* book club. Just as Gary described ideas explored online reverberating in his classroom, he noted how the book he read with distant colleagues became one he read with onsite colleagues and an administrator in his building.

Given the extensive and firm position Gary took on the betterment of his practice as a result of his participation in the online book club, Luke pressed him to explain how he could be so sure of the results he described. He explained the source of his certainty:
The kids say, “I didn’t used to read books,” “I stopped reading books,” “I did the CliffsNotes versions, or I didn’t read at all.” Now, with 10 minutes a day, it’s “I’m reading books.” “I’m finishing books.” “I find myself reading books outside of school.” “I read books every night.” A more objective indication might be that in the course of this year . . . more and more Nooks and Kindles are showing up in my class. That’s telling me that these kids are being seen as readers when it wasn’t that way at the beginning of the year. I had maybe one Nook or Kindle in each class. Now I have five or six or seven. So, that tells me that for those kids, anyway, books and reading are more important in their lives. Another way I know is I see it with my own two eyes. They’re sitting there every day engrossed in their books, and it is stone silent in our classroom for those 10 minutes while everybody, including me, is reading a book. I see it with my own two eyes.

Gary cited multiple measures to explain how he came to conclude that the shift in his practice has been for the better. Citing testimonials from students, the increased presence of e-readers in his classroom, and his own daily observations, Gary explained how he arrived at his conclusion.

With multiple subnarratives, Gary constructed a complex narrative with a heavy emphasis on the resolution of the complication he recalled. That is, much of the narrative focused on the outcomes of his participation in an online book club. By placing such emphasis on the resolution in the structure of his narrative, Gary underscored his conviction that the online book club had a meaningful impact on his thinking about reading instruction, students’ reading habits—or at least those he witnessed firsthand—and the department to which he belonged.

**It Made Me Better Here**

When prompted to talk about his initial online participation, Brian shared an experience he had within the English Companion Ning (ECN):

I saw a rubric conversation [on the ECN], and honestly I hadn’t thought much about [rubrics] over 15 years of teaching . . . And I saw this conversation about the history of the rubric and how teachers are, um, we’ve lost our focus on it. We don’t really understand what it was really intended as a tool. We’re misusing it. So when we misuse it, we teach the kids to misuse it, and we teach parents to misuse it, and we have this conversation—completely inauthentic—about what the thing is supposed to be in the first place. And that interested me because I had never heard that.

With that narrative opening, Brian offered background on a discussion about rubrics he discovered in a forum online. As Brian recalled, an online discussion about rubrics, including the fallout that occurs when teachers
misuse them, got him thinking about issues he had not considered during the first 15 years of his career.

After establishing his interest in the discussion, Brian continued by providing the narrative’s complication and explaining how his participation in the forum put him in touch with professionals who shared a similar interest in the topic at hand:

So I just started to follow the conversation, and then the author of the book [cited in the forum] was on the [ECN], so she started to talk to me and other professors would weigh in on my questions . . . and all of a sudden I’m having a very valid, collegial conversation with people I didn’t know but whose expertise I valued.

The way Brian recalled the experience, his exploration of rubrics in an online discussion forum was facilitated by his genuine interest in the topic. Consequently, as Brian described it, he found himself immersed in a “very valid, collegial conversation.” As Brian revealed during our interviews, the authentic discussion that emerged from his genuine inquiry into the use of rubrics was an experience that stood in contrast against many traditional professional development offerings he had experienced during his career—offerings that neglected teachers’ inquiries.

Then, Brian added a brief evaluation of the experience, likening it to the professional experiences he has enjoyed as a football coach: “And it was like that coaching thing, that fraternity. People were willing to share their ideas and thoughts, and no question was dumb. I wasn’t judged on it.” For Brian, the collegiality displayed by professionals within that discussion forum was akin to the positive experiences he had enjoyed at coaching clinics, where coaches share their philosophies, strategies, and instructional approaches openly and without reservation. Brian found that the individuals participating in the rubric discussion forum, like the coaches he had met at coaching clinics over the years, were sharing ideas freely and were happy to answer questions without passing judgment. Considering Brian’s delivery of the narrative, it is evident that he appreciated such collegiality, and the notion of judgment-free collegiality harks back to Brian’s narrative above, in which he shared his disdain for harsh teacher-on-teacher criticism.

Finally, Brian brought the narrative to a close and explained the resolution of his participation in the discussion about using rubrics:

And it helped. It made me better here. [Brian struck the desk for emphasis.] And that’s—to go back to an earlier comment I made—that’s the piece. I feel like you have to have that personal accountability to say “I want to be better at what I do.”
Brian believed that his self-directed participation in that online discussion improved his practice, making him a better teacher of writers. With his final words in that narrative segment, Brian affirmed that his aim in participating online is “to be better at what [he does]” and that his participation in the online discussion about rubrics helped him achieve that goal.

The structure of Brian’s narrative is telling. The most extensive portion of his narrative is the orientation, followed by the complication. Given the result of the narrative—what Brian reported to be improved practice—such heavy lifting in the orientation is necessary. To clear a path to the narrative’s resolution, Brian had to establish room for movement from point A, where he stood prior to engaging in the online discussion forum, to point B, where he stood after engaging in the forum. Brian’s orientation situated the use of rubrics as something he had not considered critically during his career, and it highlighted points of discussion that arose in the online forums. The weight of the complication and the plausibility of the resolution would be lost without the orientation planting Brian in the dark regarding rubrics. Given the narrative’s construction, it is reasonable to accept that, through online interactions with people more knowledgeable about rubrics, Brian’s thinking and in turn his practice shifted in nuanced ways. In this case, as Brian explained in his narrative, educators in the discussion forum had more knowledge about rubrics than he had at the time, and they offered the support that helped to advance the limited understanding of rubrics he had developed independently during his career.

Though the narrative structures constructed by Gary and Brian were distinct, they reinforced a common theme reported by the five selected teachers: participating online to explore topics and texts of interest informed their thinking and shaped their practice.

Positioning Oneself as a Writer

The five English teachers in this study also constructed narratives indicating that participating online helped to position them as writers. In some cases, participants saw themselves as writers for the first time. Regardless, in each case, such positioning was reported as enhancing the participant’s practice as a teacher of writers. Here, we present a narrative from Meenoo and consider how the narrative’s structure supports this theme.

I Became More Empathetic

Meenoo constructed a narrative that captured the ways writing publicly through her online participation has shaped her practice. Meenoo opened
by offering a brief abstract: “Really, my practice as a teacher changed the first time I ever [published online]. My practice became richer, became fuller, became more complex because then people were examining it, people who had maybe years on me, decades on me.” Following that opening hook, Meenoo continued by detailing the transformative nature of her experience participating online. She elaborated on the change she saw in her practice, offering the following orientation:

It was being seen by so-called experts in the field. It was being seen by the person just down the road in another neighborhood who also happened to be teaching Romeo and Juliet in ninth grade. So my practice changed. I don’t know when or how I did this, but my role as a teacher, my role as a writer, my role as a practitioner changed the day I made my students’ work public.

For Meenoo, making her practice public online opened her work to critique from other teachers who could offer fresh insights that might inform her practice. Meenoo also recognized that the change in her practice she described was not solely the result of receiving feedback from others. Rather, it was also the product of putting herself in the vulnerable role of a writer who makes her writing public, a role familiar to students in her classroom. Meenoo explained her own love/hate relationship with writing and sharing her writing:

When I write online or when I publish work online I’m completely frightened. [English teacher] Jim Burke says that writing is the most public display of our intelligence, and I always feel like, “Oh my god. People are going to think that I’m a complete idiot when they read this.”

Meenoo revealed her insecurities about making her writing public. Like other teachers in this study, she expressed concerns about looking foolish in the eyes of her peers. Still, as Meenoo explained when providing the narrative’s complication, she continued pushing herself to write:

I’m trying to write right now. I just spent all afternoon trying to write. I haven’t written, but I’m trying to write something, and I haven’t done it. I’m completely frightened by writing. I’m fascinated by writing. I love reading and writing. I love teaching writing, but I’m completely frightened of it and by it.

Again, Meenoo put her love/hate relationship with writing on full display, this time by sharing her current struggles to put words together.

Then, Meenoo provided the resolution of her effort to write and to make that writing public: “And what [publishing online] did for me is it al-
lowed me to experience what my students experience all of the time, which is having to produce work, having to share work, you know?" She continued the narrative with an extensive evaluation:

And when I started to do that I became way more empathetic. I became way more thoughtful about my practice. I became way more tolerant. Right? I was not that queen of the classroom. Like, my way—“How come you don’t know how to use a semi-colon?” Right? It truly humbled me because I knew what my students felt. I knew that I was frightened of other people’s opinion of my work, just like my students were frightened of opinions of their work by me or their peers.

Meenoo found that, as with her peers in this study, participating online gave her firsthand experience completing the same challenging tasks she asked students in her classroom to complete daily: writing and sharing writing. As Meenoo explained, making her practice public online left her feeling humbled and more empathetic to students.

The structure of Meenoo’s narrative underscored her experience. Of all the narratives featured, it has the slightest complication, which revolves around an attempt and failure to write an unspecified piece. Meenoo used much of the narrative’s content in extended orienting segments to establish her love/hate relationship with writing. Meenoo’s frontloading of her struggles to write—which then played out in the narrative’s complication—added weight to her resolution and credence to her evaluation and interpretation of events.

Generating New Professional Opportunities

Across cases, the five teachers in this study also constructed narratives indicating that they have experienced online participation as a means of generating new professional opportunities. As the selected teachers connected with others (i.e., teachers, teacher educators, and authors) online while exploring issues related to teaching, learning, and literacy, they have been offered and have accepted opportunities to extend their work as professionals in education. Such opportunities include, among others, invitations to develop teacher’s guides for young adult novels, invitations to collaborate on professional development presentations, and invitations to represent national organizations at professional meetings and conferences. A representative narrative constructed by Meenoo is presented below.
It Makes My Practice Deeper

Over the course of Meenoo’s interviews, she explained how her online participation has led her to receive invitations to represent the National Writing Project (NWP) at various events and to write for NWP’s Digital Is website, an online repository of resources related to digital writing. Such opportunities have been valuable to Meenoo’s development as a teacher, as she explained with a lengthy abstract to open her narrative:

I’m in my sixth year of teaching, and I don’t think I would have stayed as long if not for those opportunities [that arose through my online participation]. That sounds like a really big statement, I know. Of course I love my students. Of course I love teaching . . . I’m still recovering just from the day. It’s a very intense, emotional day and experience of teaching. But, like, if you don’t see—if you’re not able to have a little bit of a bird’s eye view of your practice as a teacher, I think you burn out much quicker. What these opportunities and these organizations and these networks have done is they’ve allowed me to see my own practice almost as a third person outside of myself. That sounds hokey or kind of unreal in some ways but, really, that’s what it’s done.

This summative statement is heavy with evaluative overtones. Meenoo reflected on the opportunities her online participation and the connections she has made have provided her. She concluded that without those opportunities, some of which have given her a chance to reflect on her practice, she might not have made it to her sixth year as a teacher. Aware of the gravity of the statement, Meenoo clarified her appreciation for the students in her classroom and for the act of teaching while also acknowledging the mental and emotional toll of the work. This segment is informative, for in it Meenoo revealed her reverence for reflection, something she is afforded when sharing her work with others online and at professional conferences.

To illustrate her point, Meenoo continued the narrative with an orienting segment describing one such opportunity for reflection:

For example, my kids—I taught a class on media literacy with seniors last semester. One of the units was on advertising. We looked at biases in advertisements based on race, class, gender, and sexuality, and how those were used or manipulated to sell products.

As though she wanted to stress that she was not a special case or that any teacher could do what she was about to describe, Meenoo offered this brief evaluation of the unit: “Not a ground-breaking thing. A lot of teachers do that and a lot of good work with it.” Then, Meenoo provided the narrative’s complication:
Long story short: I taught a unit on advertising, and I could have just taught that unit, right? It could have lived in these four walls, but that work went to [a professional conference] and it was looked at by all these people, and then I posted my write-up of it on Digital Is, and people from around the country are looking at it and pushing back against some of the things [I wrote] in that piece.

In this segment, Meenoo illustrated just what she had described previously: Opportunities to present at professional conferences and to publish online have given her a chance to reflect on her practice. By going public with her teaching, Meenoo has given other teachers a chance to consider and respond to her practice. At such points, Meenoo’s voice as a speaker and the voices of other teachers as listeners can come into contact and meaning can emerge.

Meenoo continued the narrative by offering an evaluation of her experience sharing her advertising unit with a wider audience, both online and face-to-face:

What all that does for me is it creates like a helix of sorts. It brings me back to what’s essential about what I was trying to do. How can I do it better? How can I move my practice forward? And I wouldn’t have at all. That lesson could have just lived in [this classroom] and would have been fine and would have been great, but by doing this chain of events it has made that unit more interesting to me and more relevant for me and will hopefully improve my practice.

Meenoo recognized that by sharing her practice at conferences and distributing it online she is afforded the opportunity to consider feedback from others and apply it to future iterations of the unit as she sees fit. According to Meenoo, participation—online and at conferences—strengthens her practice, challenging her to reconsider her work from new and varied perspectives.

Then, Meenoo offered the narrative’s resolution, the outcome of the aforementioned complication:

Will I do [the unit] differently next time? Yeah, probably, because I’ve had all these people interact with it. It didn’t just stay here. Does it happen for all the units? No, right? That’s physically and humanly impossible. But what that does is it makes my practice deeper. It makes my practice more relevant.

While Meenoo recognized the value of putting units of study on display for critique, she also maintained a sense of pragmatism. She acknowledged that, though beneficial, giving all units such treatment is not practical. Finally, Meenoo closed by returning to her initial claim that she might not be teaching today if not for the opportunities gained through her online participation:
And it goes back to that old idea that what we do is incredibly hard—and by “what we do” I mean teaching—and the more connections we have the more intricate the weave is between our connections, the stronger that bond will be. And then maybe we would be able to sustain more new teachers.

With that coda, Meenoo brought the traditionally structured narrative full circle. She contended that, in light of the challenging work of teaching, the connections teachers form through meaningful discourse online and at professional conferences have the potential to sustain novice teachers. This narrative, in which Meenoo recognized how her own online participation has sustained her passion for teaching, serves as a testament to that contention.

Enhancing the Capacity to Support Students

Findings indicated that the five English teachers in this study see that, through their online participation, they have developed an enhanced capacity to support the students in their classrooms. Sarah, like her peers, provided multiple narratives to illustrate this point. In one such narrative she described her attempts to expand her knowledge of literary genres that appeal to students in her classroom but not to her, personally, as a reader.

*I Probably Wouldn’t Have Even Known*

Sarah began the narrative by describing her tastes in literature and sharing her efforts to explore the gaps in her reading of young adult literature through a post on her blog and in exchanges with other teachers via Twitter:

Traditionally I like contemporary realistic fiction and I really like the paranormal fantasy. . . . I had a blog post that I called “My Literary Achilles’ Heel” because I do not read science fiction and I don’t read enough high fantasy. There are others, but those are two I know my students really, really enjoy, and I’m not offering them enough.

With that orientation, Sarah identified science fiction and high fantasy as her “literary Achilles’ heel,” those genres she recognizes as personal areas of weakness, for she does not typically read books in those genres. Consequently, she is generally not well-equipped to offer them to students who do.

Then, Sarah offered the narrative’s complication: “So I wrote this blog post about it . . . and I put it on Twitter and [online colleagues] gave me a whole bunch of recommendations of books that I just had to have in my classroom, books I should read.” After establishing that she received suggestions from her online peers, Sarah provided the narrative’s resolution, “So I ended up starting this series by Cinda Williams Chima,” before she shared a
corresponding evaluation of her attempt to reach out, to turn to her online peers and expand her knowledge of young adult literature:

It’s actually really good and I’m glad they told me because I love it. And I know my kids that like *Lord of the Rings* or if they like some of the high fantasy things in particular or if they like wizards and stuff like that they’ll really like that series. That author has another series that I tried and I didn’t like, but I have it in here for my kids. This one I liked and, having read it, I can talk with them about it.

In Sarah’s construction of this narrative, her attempt to enhance her capacity to support students in choosing books that might appeal to them was a success. Sarah noted her appreciation for the recommendations offered by online peers, for she found a series that she could enjoy personally and that she was confident many students would also appreciate. Additionally, though a second series did not appeal to her, she became more knowledgeable about it and made it available to students, should they want to read it, by adding it to her classroom library. In this way, Sarah’s online participation has served to enhance her capacity to support the students in her classroom.

Sarah continued, extending the resolution with a subnarrative about another set of books she picked up at an online peer’s urging. Those titles were sports-related books—another category Sarah mentioned in her “My Literary Achilles’ Heel” blog post. She shared:

One of my middle school friends [online] told me about an author named Carl Deuker, and I read a couple of his books. They were okay . . . very sports-focused. One or two of his books have been extremely popular in my classroom. Boys just can’t get enough of those ones, yet I wouldn’t have had those in there. I probably wouldn’t have even known about that author if she didn’t tell me about him.

Again, Sarah found that, based on the input of her online peers, she was able to expand her knowledge of young adult literature, particularly in relation to genres with which she is less familiar. As a result, having read sports-related titles that she may not have been aware of otherwise, as she admitted freely, she found herself better prepared to support students in selecting books that align with their interests and that fit their needs as developing readers.

As a whole, this narrative reflects the ways the participating English teachers reported using the Web to enhance their capacity to support students. In Sarah’s case, by blogging and microblogging about perceived shortcomings in her knowledge about and familiarity with specific genres of young adult literature, she invited online peers to help her identify titles she could read and in turn recommend to the students in her classroom. As
Sarah recalled, those online peers came through, helping her enhance her capacity to support students in selecting books for independent reading. Such crowdsourcing is indicative of the ways all teachers in this study participated online to support the students in their classrooms.

**Discussion**

At the beginning of this study we were unsure what, if anything, practicing teachers gained from their online participation. Yet, the narratives these teachers shared suggested that they all believed their lives as teachers were enhanced by their online activities. As they narrativized their recollections of online experiences, the episodes they shared were overwhelmingly positive. It is difficult to know with certainty why this was the case. These views may point to the teachers’ compulsion to put a positive spin on the work they were doing; it may suggest that they simply avoided negativity by abandoning online environments that did not foster positive experiences; or it may simply represent the way their online experiences coalesced in their thinking about issues related to professionally oriented participation online.

Nevertheless, these positive stories have become part of the professional experiences these teachers have in their personal histories. The stories point to how professionally oriented participation online served as personalized professional development that supported these teachers and allowed them to extend their thinking by claiming an area of expertise, such as young adult literature or writing, or by entering professional networks and new leadership roles. Their professional lives expanded as they collaborated online to develop conference presentations, to generate Webstitutes for professional learning (Rodesiler, 2014), and to receive feedback on instructional units they developed.

Moreover, all participants reported that professionally oriented participation online informed how they thought about teaching and shaped their practice as professional educators. The teachers described how, through participation in online book clubs, Twitter chats, and online discussion forums, they have taken charge of their professional development and applied their growing understandings of pedagogy to enhance literacy teaching and learning. Additionally, writing for the Web has positioned them as writers and they report that it has shaped their writing instruction.
The experiences of this small group of teachers—an admittedly unique group, per the purposive sampling employed—suggest what is possible when teachers use the Web over an extended period of time to explore issues related to teaching, learning, and literacy and to create content to share with other teachers. We do not assume nor suggest that all teachers would experience such gains.

We do observe, however, that these teachers’ actions and perspectives have informed our thinking about how prospective teachers might benefit from mastering new literacy skills (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004), such as locating, filtering, redesigning, and sharing information within a professional community. Too often the prospective teachers we meet see these Web activities as assignments for students (Pace, Rodesiler, & Tripp, 2010) and not as literacy practices that might inform their own thinking and development. Many prospective teachers do not arrive in English education programs fully capable of or committed to using online technologies to reap professional benefits. Often, they are more likely to see the Web as a giant reservoir of lesson plans that they can access for teaching a particular topic. While prospective teachers may be involved in online social networking, it is likely that they, like most college students, focus on communicating with others they already know (Ellison, Lampe, & Steinfield, 2009).

Because of the positive experiences of these teachers and the benefits that emerged in the themes from their narratives, we suggest that online professional development may also offer a lifeline to novice teachers who face issues of isolation, a need for a supportive professional community, and a paucity of opportunities for face-to-face professional development focused on literacy and the English language arts. Yet, if prospective teachers are to make the most of participating online to support their professional aims—both while preparing for and living the life of a practicing English teacher—they must learn how to use the Web not just for teaching students but also for deepening their craft.

In a study of English methods course syllabi almost two decades ago, before the Internet was widely available, Smagorinsky and Whiting (1995) identified attending a local professional conference as a task required of students in some English education programs. Similarly—though without the expenses of registration and travel—English teacher educators might require prospective teachers to participate online in various professional learning opportunities by leveraging online technologies and by producing new content. For example, in our work as English educators we try to promote the view that the Web is not just a reservoir of unlimited lesson plans and teaching ideas. Accordingly, in the capstone course of the English
education program Barbara co-coordinates, prospective English teachers are required to blog about issues related to media literacy and technology in a public forum. They are also required to produce content for other teachers in the form of iBooks that are focused on an area of expertise in ELA that these future teachers claim.

These assignments and other opportunities, such as participating in synchronous Twitter chats (e.g., monthly #nctechat sessions hosted by members of NCTE), subscribing to blogs maintained by practicing teachers, and contributing to specific topic-focused groups within professionally oriented social network sites such as NCTE’s Connected Community or English Companion Ning can acquaint students with resources and processes for online participation of a professional nature. Through participation and corresponding reflection on their experiences, including consideration of the challenges and affordances they note, prospective teachers may come to understand the opportunities available to teachers eager to engage their online peers and extend their own knowledge of teaching, learning, and literacy.

In years past, scholars have documented the devaluing of teachers’ experience and expertise (e.g., Dudley-Marling, 2005; McCracken, 2004) and noted circumstances in which teachers face obstacles to connecting with one another in face-to-face settings (e.g., Eckert & Petrone, 2015). Despite such challenges, the English teachers in this study have found ways to claim specific areas of expertise, to see themselves as writers with ideas and reflections worth sharing, and to forge connections with other professionals that sustain them and present new professional opportunities.

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References


**Luke Rodesiler**, a former high school English teacher, is a researcher and teacher educator interested in nontraditional forms of professional development, the role of popular cultures in the English language arts classroom, and media literacy education.

**Barbara Pace** co-coordinates English Proteach, a one-year graduate English teacher education program offered at the University of Florida. She also teaches a series of online and face-to-face courses focused on technology, media, and literacy.