The Language of Leadership

Teacher leaders have always inspired me. Over the course of 26 years, I’ve been privileged to know and work with many of them. I truly appreciate those who have mentored me or provided a model for me to observe and apply to my own teaching. Teacher leaders who have impressed me most are those who have enacted some form of community literacy. Linda Flower defines community literacy as a rhetorical practice for inquiry and social change. She notes its educational context in Dewey’s conceptualization of progressive education where “people learn things by a hands-on experiential and strenuously intellectual engagement with the world” (16). For me, enacting a community literacy project (the first in 1998) required the language of leadership. The language of leadership includes the ability to communicate effectively, a teacher’s curricular goals and innovative practices, to a school district’s administration, personnel, colleagues, students, parents, school board members, and other community constituents.

Community Literacy Projects
Teacher leaders consistently engage in professional development programs that provide them with literacy skills they need to build strong relationships with their community partners. Many professional development programs don’t focus enough on how new and veteran teachers might approach their community members to enact creative and innovative instructional methods, including literacy projects. Too often, teachers are left to struggle on their own through trial and error. Over the years many teacher leaders have shown me that student engagement and learning improves if students feel connected to the work they are doing in their communities. My experiences with the National Writing Project and two of its affiliate sites, Nebraska and Ozarks Writing Project, have shown me just how these community literacy projects affect student learning, specifically a growth in writing skills, because when students are engaged in genuine inquiry, they care deeply about their community partners as an audience for their work.

Square one for me in enacting a successful community literacy project was approaching my principal for the resources I needed. Luckily, I applied for a statewide nonprofit teaching award and secured this grant to fund my project, collecting oral histories from nursing home residents. I soon realized I needed to hone my persuasive communication skills before I stepped into my principal’s office requesting additional funding. I also sharpened my speaking skills to engage with members of the community outside my school building. I learned how to develop a detailed plan of the project that included a timeline, standards alignment, student outcomes, assessment, and reflection protocols, in addition to a budget and final report to the nonprofit organization. I contacted several community members and articulated precisely what my students and I planned to do and persuaded them to become our partners in authentic learning. My first community literacy project involved a great deal of risk; my greatest fear was hearing the word “no.” It was risky to ask for other necessities, for example,
buses to transport students, assistance from our technology coordinator, arranging student visits with nursing home personnel, letters of communication to parents and all participants, constructing consent forms for students and nursing home residents, and arranging computer lab time and searching for online sites to house digital stories.

The project, “Elderly Voices: Living Links to the Past,” taught me a great deal about teacher leadership and the necessity of risk and perseverance if I wanted to provide authentic literacy experiences for my students and community members. My students and I traveled to nursing homes, where student partners asked questions and recorded responses, using interviewing skills they obtained from both a historian and professional storyteller, visiting scholars funded through the grant. Once students transcribed the stories, we returned for follow-up interviews. Students in my English classes who were also art students sketched portraits of the residents. Many also took photographs. Finally, the transcribed, nuanced stories, photos, and sketches were transferred to webpages created by students. That first project gave my students a deep sense of accomplishment, but we also celebrated most what we learned: love, compassion, patience, history, dignity, and a sense of our own mortality. The subsequent years of my secondary career continued some form of community literacy, that is, family, local business, and prominent women oral histories; multigenerational work ethnographies; and, finally, a study of local poverty and hunger.

Who Is a Teacher Leader?

I left the secondary classroom four years ago, but my interest in teacher leadership continues. Because of my experience as a teacher of English and language arts enacting community literacy projects, I’ve discovered there are five essential themes of leadership: teacher as advocate for students, teacher as learner, teacher as creator/innovator, teacher as peer/mentor, and teacher as enactor of community literacy. As an advocate for students, we continually seek best practices in our classrooms that engage students in authentic learning with a variety of audiences and genuine assessment of learning outcomes. Doing this requires creativity and innovation that moves beyond the four walls of the classroom. This call for innovation requires us to be lifelong learners; we are teachers who continue to improve our practice through research and inquiry, and who value the relationships with our peers who might collaborate across disciplines or with members of our community who serve as mentors to us and our students through a collaborative project. Community literacy is one way to grow professionally, by inquiring alongside students and the members of our community. The vital question here is, “How do we frame community literacy in meaningful ways to elicit the practices and methods necessary to engage in such endeavors?”

Teacher Leader Colleagues

It is a privilege to mentor new and veteran teachers as they study and implement community literacy practices in their classrooms. Camille is in her fourth year of teaching and is an enthusiastic teacher who had a difficult first year of teaching and left that school. Her experience in her new school is quite different. In her new school, she has quickly become a leader whom others seek out for ideas and advice. She has a rapport with the constituents in her community who support her efforts to enact literacy projects. Katrina, who is now a media specialist, was in her fourth year of teaching when she enacted a community literacy project, an online literary magazine. Katrina is a part of her community beyond the school environment. Like Camille, she
has a rapport with many community members who support her efforts. Sandy was born and raised in the community where she has taught for more than 30 years. Sandy is clearly a leader in her community, a small town where teachers have a great deal of status. Over the years, she had selected a specific student as her special literacy project, that is, a student she observes who has great potential in literacy but who has dire personal circumstances. Sandy struggled to enact a literacy project, a writing club. Her school also follows a scripted curriculum and she feels her hands are tied in any effort at a community literacy project.

These three teachers articulate that teacher leaders are creative and innovative lifetime learners who advocate for their students and work collegially with their peers. Camille, Katrina, and Sandy overwhelmingly speak of community literacy as a trait of teacher leadership. For each of them, that connection to their community members plays a significant role in what it means to be a leader. But enacting community literacy projects means they must become risk-takers who aren’t afraid to fail, learn, and revise or try again.

Although Camille and Katrina are both new and untenured teachers who considered it risky to engage in community literacy due to expectations of teaching the curriculum, they both enacted their projects. Both continue to have strong relationships with their principals and constituents who support their projects’ efforts. Saundra Shillingstad et al. and Brian Edwards and Jesse Hinueber concur that a school’s principal plays a key role in developing teacher leaders. Lijuan Li et al., in a study conducted in Hong Kong, note the vital role of principals in a school’s success:

In sum, leadership for learning encompasses not only the learning of students, but also of teachers. Continued on-the-job professional learning is a fundamental means of enabling teachers to adapt to changing needs and to improve instructional skills. Principals play a key role in this domain by shaping a school environment that motivates and supports the ongoing learning of school staff. (81)

Although a strong relationship with a principal is important, a willingness to take risks and a mastery of communication with members of the community is crucial. Philip E. Poekert writes that teacher leaders must take risks and be vulnerable.

Maureen Neumann et al. note that teachers who act as leaders improve the entire school community, not just manage their respective classrooms. They write:

Teacher knowledge is much more than knowledge of what happens in a classroom, more than understanding content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, learning theories, and classroom management strategies. Being a teacher means becoming a professional leader who is active in the political environments of the school and the broader community. (10)

Camille maintained a close relationship with her principal, but she also had the support of her students and other community members. She spoke enthusiastically about her poetry slam project:

And then with the community, the two times that I was able to really utilize the community was our field trip and the poetry slam for this semester, at least, but the kids were so bought into it. Their engagement was through the roof, and they were dreading the poetry slam, but then once they got there, and the atmosphere, and they were hearing everything the kids were saying, I mean, it was just through the roof. I couldn’t have asked for a better first experience doing that unit, ‘cause I had never done it before. I mean, it was perfect.

Katrina’s principal supported her and actively engaged with her students throughout the process, “He was a huge resource to us and really supportive of—like really excited when you come to him, like, ‘I want to scrap this whole novel to do this. Can we do that?’ He says, ‘Yes, how can I support you? Yeah do it. Go make it happen. Whatever is going to support learning better.’” Katrina also had the support of community members who assisted her students in developing the online literary magazine. She writes:

Knowing my students didn’t have all of the necessary connections and resources, I facilitated communication between them and a couple serving our community and surrounding areas as expert consultants in entrepreneurial endeavors. From the start of our project, I met regularly with them, offering updates on our progress and projection, discussing how to improve our output. This connection proved critical to the completion of our project, for the experts offered valuable outside perspective, diligent in providing blunt feedback and advice. Their investment in our product, even
in spite of their inability to meet during school hours, motivated and prodded students' thinking and engagement. Students responded readily and eagerly to the accountability of community members, voicing that they felt the project held significant weight as more and more people from the community were willing to invest time and efforts to support production.

The success of Camille's and Katrina's community literacy projects hinged on the support of many community members and their belief in the expertise of them as teacher leaders. Both saw increased engagement in their students, especially Katrina. She notes that her senior students were unmotivated and usually showed up to "go through the motions" until graduation day.

Sandy had strong relationships with her constituents and is considered a community leader, but she feels she has never had a true administrative leader:

Over time the leadership that I've experienced has really been on an individual basis. I've had no administrators who were teacher leaders and instructional leaders for me ever. None that had anything to offer about what I already knew. So everything that I have done has been trial and error and on my own, or networking with other teachers in the building or other teachers in the same content area.

Clearly, in my conversations with Sandy, she understands the dynamic of her community. It is her lifelong home and she cherishes it. I began to wonder, "What's the difference between Sandy and her colleagues, Camille and Katrina? What specific skills could Sandy learn to approach her community members? What kinds of literacy does it require to ask for support of an innovative instructional choice? How do we become leaders, whether it is enacting community literacy or another innovative method?"

Communication is the key in Camille's and Katrina's success. Both received support for their instructional choices. It's clear from their conversations they are comfortable approaching their community members about their projects, and they clearly conveyed their ideas and plans for their principals' stamps of approval, and in Katrina's case, being present in her actual classroom working side-by-side with students. Were Camille and Katrina just natural leaders? Can all teachers be leaders? What role does a principal have in helping teachers become leaders in their communities?

In a study conducted in Turkey, Engin Aslanargun notes teachers' perceptions of successful principals include skill in leadership and communication. Aslanargun writes,

The concepts and themes generally focused on human relationships, meaning that behaviors of principals should be shaped by considerations of leadership and communication. Communication, empathy, and initiative are the concepts teachers paid the most attention to throughout the study, and these are the psychological characteristics that principals need to adapt most whatever their preferred leadership style has been. Having a considerate style of administration and providing support for teachers were the core recommendations of the research. (18)

Sandy's principal, new to her community, may be an inexperienced principal, but it's more likely he was restricted by budget constraints. Since her initial attempt at enacting a writing club, Sandy applied for a grant from our local art museum (40 miles from her rural school), funding transportation for her middle school students to visit the museum and participate in writing activities centered on the artwork. According to Sandy, it was the first time many of her students had ever traveled outside of their community.

Conclusion

Teacher leaders regularly participate in professional development that emphasizes the kinds of literacy practices that facilitate ongoing communication with their school's constituents. Teacher leaders act as mentors by giving novice teachers explicit instruction on how to present a detailed outline or curricular unit to administrators and community partners. Often, young teachers may not completely understand how to navigate bureaucratic channels to request the resources they might need. Teacher leaders research sources for external funding and continue to hone their grantwriting skills.
Teacher leaders acknowledge that a strong relationship with their principals is vital if there is pushback from the community or students as they enact community literacy or innovative instructional strategies. Teacher leaders urge their principals, colleagues, students, and community members to support the freedom to ask the compelling questions focused on the needs of their communities. Teachers leaders consistently seek support in developing the skills necessary to advocate for structured time to cocreate literacy projects that enhance and sustain communities through local investigations. Moreover, teacher leaders encourage and nurture each other to be curious explorers who investigate issues or concerns in their communities, and acknowledge that failure can elicit deeper meaning for themselves and their students, but most importantly, they master the language of leadership, communicating their ideas and instructional choices to community members in ways that elicit full support in achieving their curricular endeavors, thereby improving student learning.

Works Cited

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

There are many resources available to teacher leaders for professional development, forging community partnerships, and grant funding for community literacy or innovative instructional practices. I encourage teachers to seek out local partners, but provide websites as a means to initiate research.

Professional Development
• National Writing Project
  www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource_topic /professional_development
• NCTE
  www.ncte.org
• U.S. Department of Education—Transforming Teaching and Leading
  www.ed.gov/teaching

Community Partner Possibilities
• MuseumsUSA—Lists of Museums in the United States
  www.museumsusa.org/museums/
• Feeding America—Find Your Local Food Bank
  www.feedingamerica.org/find-your-local-foodbank/
• National Coalition for the Homeless
  nationalhomeless.org/references/directory/
• National Wildlife Federation—What We Do
  www.nwf.org/What-We-Do.aspx
• Association for Library Service to Children
  www.ala.org/alsc/aboutalsc/external-relationships /organizations
• Youth.Gov—After School Programs (and other programs)
  youth.gov/youth-topics/afterschool-programs

Community Literacy Grant Funding
• National Endowment for the Humanities—State Humanities Councils
  www.neh.gov/about/state-humanities-councils
• National Endowment for the Humanities—Match Your Project to a Grant
  www.neh.gov/grants/match-your-project
• Rural School and Community Trust
  www.ruraledu.org/
• Teachers Count
  www.teacherscount.org/grants/
• Youth Service America
  ysa.org/grants/
The Language of Leadership


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READWRITEThink CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Consider using ReadWriteThink.org as a partner! Teachers can easily integrate lesson plans and activities into classroom use. Everything is organized so teachers can find exactly what they’re looking for and exactly which standards are being met. The huge number of resources here almost guarantees teachers will find something that works. The professional development section is helpful, too, with strategy guides and information on meetings, events, and online seminars for language arts and literacy teachers. http://bit.ly/2xqskkt

Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE’s Conference on English Education offers this award to support teacher research projects that further the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett. Moffett, a great champion of the voices of K–12 teachers, focused on such ideas as the necessity of student-centered curricula, writing across the curriculum, alternatives to standardized testing, and spiritual growth in education and life. This award is offered in conjunction with the National Writing Project.

Applications for the Moffett Award should be in the form of a proposal for a project that one or more K–12 classroom teachers wish to pursue. The proposal must include

• A cover page with the applicant’s name, work and home telephone numbers and addresses, email address, a brief profile of the applicant’s current school and students, and a brief teaching history (when and where the applicant has taught).

• A proposal (not more than 5 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font) that includes an introduction and rationale for the work (What is the problem or question to be studied? How might such a project influence the project teacher’s practice and potentially the practice of other teachers? Why is such a project important?); a description of the connection to the spirit and scholarship of James Moffett; initial objectives for the study (realizing these might shift during the project); a clear, focused project description that includes a timeline (What will be done? When? How? By whom?); a method of evaluating the project (What indicators might reviewers note that suggest the work was valuable to the researcher and to other teachers?); and a narrative budget (How will the money be spent?).

• A letter of support from someone familiar with the applicant’s teaching and perceived ability to implement and assess the proposed project.

Moffett Award winners receive a certificate designating the individual as the 2018 recipient of the CEE Moffett Award and a monetary award (up to $1,000) to be used toward implementation of the proposed project.

Submit proposals to CEE Moffett Award, at cee@ncte.org, Attn: CEE Liaison. Proposals must be received by September 19, 2018. Proposals will be judged on such criteria as the strength of the connection to James Moffett’s scholarship and the perceived value and feasibility of the project.