

Professional Learning on a Shoestring: Advice and Reflections from Connected Educators and Authors

Oona Abrams, joined NCTE 1997, joined CEL 2005

Surrounding ourselves with passionate literacy educators both energizes and rewards us, but sometimes it's not possible to attend national conventions. If you're feeling disheartened that you or a colleague won't be able to attend the CEL National Convention this year, you're not alone. Purse strings are tight in school districts across the nation, but don't despair. In those "in-between" years, thanks to social media, you and your colleagues can pursue free professional learning beyond the [#NCTE16](#) and [#CEL16](#) backchannels. The feeling we wish we could bottle after attending NCTE or CEL is possible to recapture and transmit in smaller local initiatives. It's also possible to learn from the comfort of your own home. CEL member [JoEllen McCarthy](#), a literacy coach from New York and Book Ambassador for [The Educator Collaborative](#), suggests visiting archives of [The EdCollab Gathering](#) to virtually attend events such as an [author panel](#) or [free workshop](#). Events such as [International Dot Day](#) also offer literacy educators opportunities to connect and collaborate. Whether through face-to-face connections at professional conferences or the online connections we make on social media, we can still connect with our "CEL-mates."

[Nerdy Book Club](#) founder and NCTE member [Colby Sharp](#) and his entire [#NerdCampMI](#) team exemplify how the EdCamp model for professional literacy learning is growing increasingly desirable. [Susan Dee](#), a CEL member and a K–5 literacy strategist in Freeport, Maine, is in the process of planning her fourth [#NerdCampNNE](#) (Nerd Camp Northern New England). "I live in a section of the country where professional development that's affordable

is sometimes difficult to come by," Susan says. "I come in contact with some teachers who are never going to have the opportunity to attend NCTE." Inspired by the work of her fellow Nerdy Book Club members, JoEllen McCarthy reached out to other connected educators to coordinate [#NerdCampLI](#) (Nerd Camp Long Island). Following the success of this came [#KidLitPalooza](#), an event inspired by Nerd Camp Jr. in Michigan, that brought together professional authors, budding student writers, and educators. These events have grown over time, but to start your own regional Nerd Camp, all of the experts make the same recommendations: start small, stick to the EdCamp model, and consider the following advice.

Form a strong and balanced team to organize the conference.

Be willing to delegate specific tasks so that each person is in charge of one aspect of the conference, and allow others to take leads. Susan notes that if members of the team have a history of working alongside strong administrators, that is a big plus. "On our committee, we have a mix of classroom teachers, school librarians, and literacy coaches. We cover kindergarten through high school." Make sure your state and/or region are well-represented. A team member who's strong with technology is a must, as are people who have organized large-scale conferences before. But keep it as small as you can, given all of the above. (Susan's team is at its maximum with ten people.) Once the team is in place, find a good location (likely a school), find out how much they charge to use the facility, and make sure the venue is centrally located, with access to restaurants and hotels.

Be open to feedback, before, during and after the event, "Not just the good stuff," Susan advises, "but the stuff you need to improve upon."

Promote, promote, promote.

"Social media is your best friend," Susan says. Setting up a separate Twitter account and Facebook page are essential, as is launching a blog. Tweet out posts from the blog regularly. Some teams do send digital flyers to school districts, but as the event grows over the years, it may become less necessary to do so. If you register your event with the [EdCamp Foundation](#), then the team there will also help to promote your event.

Organize the "unconference" around attendees' needs.

In "[Postcards from NerdCamp](#)," *School Library Journal* published a comprehensive description and guide for organizing a Nerd Camp. It's important to organize your event in ways that honor the focus areas of those in attendance. "As we were building the schedule on the day of, we set the schedule up by threads: K–2, 3–5, and a separate thread for librarians," Susan shares. Bigger blocks like K–5 and 6–12 were also on the schedule. While workshops will run themselves and have an organic feel, setting up a relevant framework helps guarantee that people aren't wasting their time.

Stay focused on the EdCamp philosophy and model.

Stick to the "vote with your feet" model of workshop attendance. If one is not working for your needs, attendees can leave and walk into another. This might have been considered "tacky" in years past, but making it a norm honors that teachers are maximiz-



Phil Bildner adds a workshop on author visits to the board at Nerd Camp Long Island.

ing their conference time. The most pleasant complication, according to Susan, is when people can't get to all the workshops they'd like to attend. Setting up [a notes archive](#) in Google Drive has become a common practice at #NerdCampMI.

In the first few years, author presence is nice but not necessary.

Given the exponential growth of the original Nerd Camp in Michigan, your team might be tempted to dream big about author attendance, but walk; don't run. "You can do a Nerd Camp without an author there," Susan says. "The focus is on our professional learning and how we can learn from each other." Now, after organizing several Nerd Camps, the team in northern New England plans an author signing at the school, an event for people coming from a distance to attend the evening before. They collaborate with a local independent bookstore to sell the books, and the author volunteers.

When the time is right to invite authors, you'll know.

Thanks to abundant opportunities to connect with authors, JoEllen McCarthy befriended Nerd Camp aficionados [Nora Raleigh Baskin](#) and [Gae Polisner](#). Baskin, author of *Nine, Ten* and *Ruby on the Outside*, has now

participated in several Nerd Camps. "Writers are usually alone all day and we welcome the chance not only to meet readers, but other authors. It keeps me in touch ... with schools and teachers and what's going on in education." Baskin recommends referencing the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) [website](#) to search for authors by state. Polisner, author of *The Memory of Things*

and *The Summer of Letting Go*, and cofounder of #NerdCampLI and #KidLitPalooza, recommends following educators on Twitter who have close relationships with authors, such as CEL member [Donalyn Miller](#) and NCTE members [Paul Hankins](#), [John Schu](#), [Cindy Beth Minnich](#) and [Pernille Ripp](#), who host and participate in monthly chats like #titletalk, #mg-chat, #NCTEChat, and #CELChat.

Polisner identifies three factors that will keep authors coming back to Nerd Camps: hospitality, book signings, and strong attendance. Since authors are donating their time and talent, and also paying out of pocket to attend, welcoming them is essential. Provide meals and beverages, and convey excitement about their presence. Arrange for books to be brought in and sold by an outside vendor. With this weight off of the author's shoulders, the focus can be on making connections. Most authors are like Polisner, who values connecting with "educators who are vocal about their love

of what [we] do . . . and who spread word of all the books they love and use in their classrooms." When it comes to sponsorship, there's safety in numbers. "Publishers are most likely to sponsor an event which has proven itself and grown," Polisner advises.

Reflect on successes and bring the positive energy back home.

All of the work done at Nerd Camp is to benefit our students. "Children are our curriculum," JoEllen McCarthy reflects. "The work that we all do is getting kids to value learning as life work and not 'school' work." Growing the local leadership capacity of your teachers is another one of the many benefits of hosting a Nerd Camp, since it welcomes teachers who may never present at a state or national conference. "We're giving these teachers an opportunity to experience the coming together of like-minded people who are passionate about literacy and learning," Susan says. Some sessions may have only a few attendees, while others might be standing room only, but all teacher-led workshops are beneficial. When teachers have the opportunity to facilitate a session and share their own learning, they discover their own leadership potential and bring that energy back to their own school communities. ●



Gae Polisner kicks off KidLitPalooza with a book talk from her novel *The Summer of Letting Go*.