

Creating a Circle of Learning: Teachers Taking Ownership through Professional Communities

The bell rings, signaling the start of a typical first hour. Although the size of this class is small, the chatter from this particularly social class rivals the noise made by the 28 middle school students who enter my room much later in the day. Their energy fills the room. It is an energy that jumpstarts each of my mornings, preparing me for the 120 students I will encounter throughout the day.

It is an energy that can be daunting to those new to the field or, perhaps, to the middle school classroom. It is an energy that I channel daily as I design lessons that will embrace those social behaviors, while teaching students the skills required of a seventh-grade English classroom.

On this particular morning, my students are particularly eager to begin the day's activity because they have spent the previous class period and evening preparing for it. I marvel at the idea that a classic poem such as Alfred Noyes's "The Highwayman" can generate such excitement, yet it does. I would like to believe it is because they cannot wait to hear my own interpretation of the tragic story of the fair maiden Bess and her forbidden love. The reality is that they know they are about to take the reins on their own learning by doing what they do best: talk. Socratic circles—student-led discussions that allow students to explore topics and readings through their own agendas—are a class favorite. Divided into two groups, an inner circle discusses the poem, pointing out favorite descriptions, questioning the meaning of words

or the actions of the characters, and sharing personal insights; the outer circle monitors the quality of conversation, stopping the discussion from time to time to point out the strengths of the group's analysis and the areas individuals need to work on. I just sit back in amazement and listen to the individual concepts we have learned in class meld into a cohesive whole. I watch students use context clues as they work together to figure out the meaning of *casement*. I shake my head as they point out metaphors like the road's appearance as a gypsy's ribbon and then continue to discuss its value to the poem: "Oh! It's really swervy 'cause the gypsies are always moving their ribbons in the air!" I cheer inside as they begin to connect this work to stories like *Romeo and Juliet* and the works of Edgar Allen Poe. And I realize that a year earlier, I would never have imagined this scene to be possible.

My teaching career began nine years ago in the high school English classroom. Like many new teachers, I had the lofty idea that I would enter the classroom and my students would be enthusiastic about discussing the merits of fine literature with me. For five years I worked with high school students, taking on core English classes as well as language arts electives. As I look back on my years as a high school teacher, I know I was a good teacher because I can still envision the faces of the numerous non-readers I hooked on reading and of the emerging writers I helped refine their craft.

But I was not a great teacher. Although I was well respected by my students, my classroom (and my students) lacked the energy I describe above, because they felt no ownership in their learning. I felt I was failing them until the day I received an

email from a mother whose son was in my eighth-hour English 10 class. An elementary teacher in the district, “Lee’s” mom was used to seeing him bring home failing grades because, while Lee was very intelligent, he refused to play the school game. She wanted me to know that despite the “F” Lee had emblazoned on his third-quarter report card, she considered the year a success because I had Lee reading again, a love that had been extinguished during his seventh-grade year. I knew then that this is where I needed to be—the middle school classroom.

After looking at my options, I finally settled on a small district 30 to 40 miles away from my previous position. The job promised to be a challenge, as I would work with seventh- and eighth-grade struggling readers. From my involvement in various professional organizations, I knew that this district was big on young adult literature, a passion of mine, so I was excited about the possibilities. Then August came, and my excitement slowly faded. Yes, I would be using young adult literature, but I would also be teaching from a scripted program that bored my students, and me, to tears.

That year was a struggle. I hated the thought of switching districts yet again, but I couldn’t fathom trudging my way through another year of tedious scripts. In desperation, I emailed my undergraduate professor, seeking out his advice. And once again, my life was transformed by an email—an email that led me to the professional development experience that altered the way I approach teaching and prompted the scene that opens this article.

An Introduction to the Flint Hills Writing Project

As the director of the Flint Hills Writing Project (an affiliate of the National Writing Project), my former professor urged me to join the group that next summer in Manhattan, Kansas. The idea was not a new one; I had kept in touch with him over the past six years, but I could not imagine that this professional side trip could be worth five weeks of my summer. If I were to attend the Summer

Institute, I would have to pack up my two young children, find them daycare in an unfamiliar city, leave my husband at our home two hours away, and stay with my mother during the week. I had a master’s degree. I had attended staff professional development programs sponsored by the school district. Would the FHWP offer me anything new that would offset the headaches associated with the effort? Yes, he assured me. This would be an entirely different experience. So, after researching the philosophies of the National Writing Project, I set out to make the arrangements that would allow me to experience the most beneficial professional development of my career.

My affiliation with the NWP began in the summer of 2005. When I first entered the room that housed the FHWP Summer Institute, I knew only one face, that of my former professor. In front of me, I witnessed eleven other expressions that mirrored my own slightly puzzled, slightly fearful one. Fluttering around the room were eight to ten others who clearly knew each other and felt comfortable with the bustle of this environment. Their faces held such expectation that I was fearful of disappointing them and almost left before it began. Only the knowledge that I was not alone in these feelings and in this experience gave me the courage to stay and listen.

I soon learned that the confident faces belonged to teacher-consultants and co-directors of FHWP. In other words, it was in their hands that I was placing the remainder of my summer. I assumed they would be my “teachers,” but the error of my reasoning was exposed as I learned that all of us, inexperienced and experienced alike, would take turns in this role. Keeping the importance of teacher learning in the forefront, all participants would share their writing and their best teaching practices as we all continued our quests to impact our students’ learning. Most important, while the focus of the Summer Institute revolved around

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writing, I found that reading was just as valued. In fact, the teacher consultants constantly stressed the strong ties that existed between these two elements of language arts instruction.

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So for five weeks, Monday through Thursday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., we engaged in morning writing activities, followed by teacher demonstration lessons and afternoons filled with professional readings, discussions, and personal writing time. At times, we worked in small teams, sharing our past classroom successes and building presentations that would showcase what we knew to be sound teaching practices. It was during this time that I first learned about the power of Socratic Circles. Past attempts at class discussions had generally wound up with me trying to draw meaningful comments from a sea of bored students—a far cry from the analysis of “The

Highwayman,” where the group determined that the outlaw must have been special because Bess loved him despite all the attempts to capture him.

For me, this was a time to take stock of all my past achievements and realize that many of my approaches were forward-thinking, prompting others to want to learn from me. Through my writing that summer, I exorcized my demons and gained confidence in myself as a writer, an essential trait for those who teach writing. I also discovered how much I could learn from other teachers. According to Ball and Cohen (1999), the most effective professional development practices occur when teachers have the opportunity to learn from teachers outside their own subject-areas and grade levels. When I first arrived at the FHWP, I assumed that because it was a *writing* project, all teachers involved would be English teachers. And while the majority of those in attendance did teach middle and secondary level language arts, I also found myself learning from elementary teachers, a science teacher, and a history teacher. Most of my experiences with professional colleagues had

SIDE TRIP: TEACHERS TAKING OWNERSHIP THROUGH PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITIES

With the positive message in this article of the many benefits of collaborative inquiry as a foundation, we offer the following resources for teachers and administrators interested in developing professional learning communities in their school districts:

- All Things PLC (<http://www.allthingsplc.info/>)
The website is a clearinghouse of information for educators interested in professional learning communities. All Things PLC provides research, articles, data, and tools designed to develop and sustain professional learning communities. Their vision is to ensure that all students learn by ensuring that adults in the organization are continually learning.
- Banford, H., & National Writing Project (U.S.). (1996). *Cityscapes : Eight views from the urban classroom*. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.
The book focuses on working in an urban school setting. Each of the book's eight essays focuses on specific possibilities for teaching writing in an urban classroom. The essays highlight ways to incorporate a multicultural curriculum into writing workshop. Specific examples throughout the book emphasize how to help English language learners and students who struggle academically become successful in writing. There are also ideas on how schools can involve parents in the writing workshop.
- Bauman, A., Peterson, A., & National Writing Project. (2002). *Breakthroughs: Classroom discoveries about teaching writing*. Berkeley, CA: National Writing Project.

SIDE TRIP: CONTINUED

The book explains and demonstrates the practical application of writing in classrooms. Throughout the book, the authors highlight classroom discoveries during this comprehensive writing process. Good teaching ideas are documented, as are bends in the road. The authors provide detailed information on how they improved and revamped their own teaching based on students' needs.

- DuFour, R. (2004). Schools as learning communities. *Educational Leadership*, 61(8), 6–11.
This article focuses on ways to create successful professional learning communities. The author, Richard DuFour, believes that schools must focus on the following big ideas that represent the core principles of professional learning communities: learning rather than teaching, working collaboratively, and holding yourself accountable for results. The article provides clear examples of how to start and sustain professional learning communities.
- Fletcher, R. (1992). *What a writer needs*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
What a Writer Needs is a comprehensive book geared towards someone who teaches writing or anyone who wants to refine their craft. Ralph Fletcher provides a detailed explanation of the essentials and elements of writing throughout the book. He provides examples and advice geared towards improving student writing throughout all grade levels.
- Gallery of Teaching and Learning (<http://gallery.carnegiefoundation.org/>)
The website is an avenue to advance teaching and learning by exchanging educational knowledge, experiences, ideas, and reflections. Moreover, tools and resources are available to document and disseminate teacher inquiry into practice.
- National Writing Project, & Nagin, C. (2003). *Because writing matters: Improving student writing in our schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
Nagin focuses on the product and process of writing in this updated version. He uses research and practice in writing to meet student needs, specifically English language learners and students who struggle in writing. The use of incorporating technology into writing is also addressed throughout the book. This book is suited for teachers, parents, and administrators who want to align research-based methods to writing.
- National Writing Project (<http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/doc/about.csp>)
The website is a network where teachers of writing in all grade levels share their ideas and extend their knowledge in the teaching of writing. Their mission is to improve the teaching of writing and to improve the use of writing across all disciplines by offering high-quality professional development programs for all educators. Key features of the website include an extensive resource page, a bi-monthly e-newsletter, a results page, and information on beginning a new writing project site.
- Friedrich, L., Tateishi, C., Malarkey, T., Simons, E., Williams, M. (Eds.). (2006). *Working toward equity: Resources and writings from the teacher research collaborative*. Berkley, CA: National Writing Project.

Working toward Equity grew out of a three-year collaboration among educators who believe in the power of inquiry. Through 13 narratives, the book explores the issue of equity in classrooms, schools, districts, and professional development organizations. The book is divided into three main sections: (1) Making Equity Explicit in Inquiry, (2) Examining Questions of Equity in Teaching, and (3) Building Inquiry Communities and Leadership for Equity. The final section includes further reading related to teacher research in urban schools.

—Kendall Kiser and Karen Wood

been highly departmentalized, so this exchange with such an eclectic group built a refreshing camaraderie that soon meant I mourned the end of the day and waited eagerly for the next day to start.

If this alone had been the result of my summer spent at the FHWP, I would have been grateful. I had come to know myself as an educator and a person better than I ever had before, I understood the value of research, and I had a better grasp on what my role as a literacy educator should be. Thanks to the well-rounded experience of the Summer Institute, I now had a better understanding of how to integrate reading and writing in order to meet my students' literacy needs. But as many experts in professional development point out, the most successful professional development is sustained over time (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Lieberman & Miller, 1999). "The possibilities for individual teacher learning increase greatly as professional communities move

from individualistic or 'balkanized' cultures to 'collaborative cultures,' and towards what can be described as 'learning communities'" (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1999, p. 381). Unbeknownst to me at the time, this is exactly what I had joined. I now belonged to a learning community that continued to push me as a professional and provide support through the rough times that eventually occur for all teachers.

The most exciting aspect of the FHWP experience is that while I began it as a learner, I emerged as a leader and collaborator. Due to the support of my new community, I joined six other teacher consultants (a title we earned at the end of the Summer Institute) in the pursuit of certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. This stressful process forces teachers to closely examine how their teaching practices impact student learning. It's time-consuming as teachers examine the individual needs of all their students and develop strategies to meet them. There were times during that year that I wanted to throw up my hands in defeat. Then, I would find myself driving back to Manhattan to share my videos and portfolio entries with my colleagues, and through their encouragement, I would rediscover my desire to finish the process. Fortunately for me, my efforts were successful; I earned my national certification the next year. But even if I had not, the careful analysis of my own teaching, combined with the conversations of my learning community, would have resulted in growth as a teacher, regardless of the piece of paper.

Through the support of FHWP, I returned to the college classroom, pursuing my doctorate degree and immersing myself in the possibilities new literacies have for the language arts classroom. I have been able to share my own research, teach others how to incorporate technology into the classroom, and teach reading comprehension skills in the process through presentations at district, state, and national conferences, thus impacting students beyond my own classroom.

I have also continued to model the writing process for my students, sharing with them my

SIDE TRIP: SOCRATIC CIRCLES IN ACTION

Socratic circles are central to Seglem's work to teach students to read more critically and to engage in reader response in active ways. As students explore ideas in this open-ended discussion model, they ask and respond to deep questions that require complex critical thinking. Gone are questions with easy yes-or-no answers. Students engage in analysis of the reading and work together to synthesize the many ideas that are shared.

To see this technique in action, try the ReadWriteThink lesson plan "Enchanting Readers with Revisionist Fairy Tales." The lesson's Socratic discussions lead students through an exploration of age-appropriate texts of various formats that are in their own ways revisionist fairy tales. Accustomed to the conventional fairy tale prompts, students are able to challenge and explore the boundaries of the genre as they engage in deep critical thinking. Together, the class uses Socratic discussion to actively construct learning and strengthen the classroom community. The lesson is available online at http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=992.

—Traci Gardner
www.readwritethink.org

own personal successes. After completing an article on censorship, for instance, I emailed the article to young adult author Chris Crutcher, who personally responded, encouraging me to submit it for publication. I shared my excitement and his email with my students, who applauded me when they heard his encouragement. This excitement spreads, urging students to keep writing. In fact, they asked to see my article if and when it was published, another opportunity to share the rewards of publishing. They can see I am a writer, witness my reactions to rejection letters, and recognize that not all material will be liked by all people. They can gain insight into my own philosophies, too, as well as an understanding of why I teach the way I do.

So, why *do* I teach the way I do? I have become a successful middle school teacher, largely due to the Flint Hills Writing Project. That's not to say that I had nothing to do with my success. I now know that I had everything to do with it. But it took the supportive learning community of the FHWP to help me unlock my potential, just as we, as teachers, try to create a supportive learning environment in our own classrooms to unlock our students' potentials. Without the FHWP, I would never have had the opportunity to hear "Tad" express his confusion about the ending of "The Highwayman," and "Melanie's" suggestion that it might just be referring to his ghost. I would never have witnessed the debate on how the difference between the use of "a" rather than "the" supports

Melanie's opinions. I would never have understood how student ownership in learning can lead to far greater strides than I could have accomplished on my own. And while not every teacher can drive to Manhattan, Kansas, to experience the FHWP, fortunately, an affiliate of the National Writing Project can be found in every state, providing opportunities for all teachers, no matter their grade level or subject area, to participate in a professional development experience that can be transforming.

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Robyn Seglem is currently a doctoral student at Kansas State University. She is a co-director of the Flint Hills Writing Project, an affiliate of the National Writing Project, and a National Board Certified teacher. She taught for nine years in the middle school and high school language arts classroom.