

# Regaining Momentum: Teacher Inquiry as Ongoing Professional Development

**M**y eighth-graders have in many ways exceeded my expectations in reading and writing; they have accepted the challenge to leave their comfort zones to immerse themselves in reading new, more challenging forms of literature. Their writing has shown real growth—it has taken on an almost mature nature for some. I'm sad to think of releasing my students to another teacher who will have the joy of pushing them even further along in their learning.

My junior high students and I have productively read several novels and have enjoyed creating many pieces of writing together, several of which were published and shared outside of our classroom. But now the question looming large as I ponder their transition to high school is this: Is there an area I have neglected?

For many years, I have felt ineffective when teaching research papers. I took pride in creatively meeting the state standards throughout my teaching of writing, yet I felt as if I were sleepwalking in my instruction in the area of research. I recall my own reading and writing experience as a middle level student, and research papers were the assignments I dreaded the most. I selected fiction for independent reading any day of the week. However, when given a choice of reading material in this classroom, several students have chosen informational texts for their independent reading assignments. Our curriculum encourages exposure to this type of material in science and history, but when it comes to English class, we stick mostly to

novels in order to learn the many literary elements the high schools will expect these students to know. As seventh-graders, my students had enjoyed reading informational texts in connection with a joint history and reading project on the Civil War, assessed through a written report and oral presentation. Noting this and talking about it with other teachers helped me see the value of using writing across the curriculum. While students expressed satisfaction in the choices they were given in the reading portion of the project, I sensed they were not as invested in the writing segment as they could have been. Following a series of mini-lessons—note taking, graphic organizers, and citations—the students gravitated to materials of high interest, collecting and organizing a wealth of information. However, I was disappointed with the final written reports because the writing lacked voice and enthusiasm. The final results were a simple regurgitation of information. I hoped at some point to revisit writing with informational texts.

Recently, a colleague piqued my interest by her presentation at a workshop for local teachers on looking for ways to use multigenre writing, as she had in her classroom. As I anticipated revisiting my students' research projects, I formed two goals: 1) to help my students gain content knowledge and 2) to identify ways for my students to express their knowledge more creatively.

## Looking for Professional Support

On the surface, I seemed to be enjoying multiple avenues for professional development and support, but though I found value in these experiences, I constantly felt that I needed something more. For example, the multigenre writing workshop, like

many I'd attended before it, provided an excellent spark for me to review my own methods, yet it did not provide me with the impetus to reform my teaching. Likewise, I had attended several workshops and the summer institute of the National Writing Project, one of nearly 200 university sites across the U.S. where the National Writing Project holds summer workshops in which teachers share ideas about using writing more effectively in the classroom. While provid-

ing excellent materials and resources for the daily teaching of writing in my classroom, the four-week institute did not provide me with enough time to immerse myself fully into much-needed self-evaluation. I appreciated the network of teachers with whom I'd been teamed for the summer—they provided excellent short-term collaboration—but short-term collaboration was not enough to make me instigate needed changes in my teaching of research writing. I needed more to effectively evaluate and analyze my classroom practice.

The real breakthrough occurred for me later that fall when a group of teachers, led by a co-director from our National Writing Project site, invited me to participate in a yearlong teacher inquiry group. Twelve teachers from five schools, with the co-director facilitating, would meet as our inquiry group. We each committed to two phases of the work: exploring two questions during the course of the school year, and writing a newsletter article about one of the questions the following summer. I found the invitation intriguing, for I had no idea what to expect. I was excited to learn what I could with the support of others.

### SIDE TRIP: VIRTUAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

What if you don't have a group of colleagues at your school with whom you can engage in the type of professional learning opportunity discussed in this article? Or what if the professional learning opportunities at your school are not organized around professional learning communities and, instead, are still "sit and get" workshops? Thankfully, there are a number of virtual professional learning communities that offer amazing interactions with colleagues from around the country or world and provide similar opportunities for reflection, interaction, growth, and development. Here are a few of the virtual professional development opportunities in which I've participated.

- **NCTE Pathways.** Yes, our very own National Council of Teachers of English provides online professional learning communities focused on adolescent literacy, English language learners, and literacy in the 21st century. These courses are highly interactive and provide access to an amazing collection of NCTE resources. See [www.ncte.org/profdev/online](http://www.ncte.org/profdev/online).
- **TeachFirst.** Started by science teacher Sandi Everlove, TeachFirst provides "just in time" professional development that includes access to videos, discussion guides, reflections, and case studies. See [www.teachfirst.com](http://www.teachfirst.com).
- **Knowledge Delivery Systems.** Through instructional units, KDS provide online professional development courses with which teachers can earn credit for continuing education, inservice, or graduate work. Their courses feature prominent speakers such as Jay McTighe and Carol Ann Tomlinson. See [www.kdsi.org](http://www.kdsi.org).

—Douglas Fisher

### Finding the Teacher Inquiry Group

The teacher inquiry group turned out to be the best professional development I've experienced. I have taken part in countless traditional professional development activities over the years, but they amounted to "drive-by" workshops and seminars that tried to cram weeks' worth of learning into my brain in a few short hours. While the workshops were excellent in introducing me to new ideas and inspiring me, these activities did not provide the needed immersion into the subject matter that would result in meaningful changes in my own classroom. Making those changes would take time, the one thing traditional professional development cannot offer.

The framework for our teacher inquiry group was simple: formulate a question, gather data, and reflect. I was hungry for novel ways to address content while exploring how my students might best learn. The inquiry group provided "an on-

going discussion among teachers who confront similar issues” and are able to “facilitate change by encouraging the sharing of solutions to problems, as well as by reinforcing the sense that, with time, improvement is possible” (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001, p. 928). The teachers in my group met monthly at a coffee shop, and for one hour we exchanged ideas and reflected together. I appreciated the feedback and always left refreshed and invigorated. When I struggled, someone always seemed to have a positive suggestion. Instead of stalling (as I would have had I been working on my own), I gained momentum to forge ahead. I knew that over the course of the school year, I would be held accountable to address my questions.

The support of my administrator solidified my work. He provided resources for my classroom and opportunities for me to observe other teachers. I also received feedback from other teachers invited to observe my teaching. My administrator understood that quality professional development often takes place through teamwork. Our active learning took place over a period of time; the ongoing professional dialogue of the teacher inquiry group and the mentoring by my administrator supported and refreshed me.

The enthusiasm for this form of professional development spread. The three teachers participating in the inquiry group from my school were often found chatting about our projects in the workroom or hallways at school. It was encouraging to see other teachers ask about our work as well. From the experience in my classroom, others were seeing the value of ongoing professional development. I knew I would want to be part of such a group again in the future. It is difficult to keep a good thing to oneself. Soon other teachers in my department and throughout the building joined the conversation about teacher inquiry groups. By spring, eight teachers from several departments had planned to form a teacher inquiry group the following year. At the end-of-year meetings, they invited any teacher to join and presented a proposal to our administrator requesting resources.

## Turning Information into Multigenre Writing

With the support of a group of teachers devoted to making similar changes in their own classrooms and a year to work on improving my teaching strategies, I researched ways to provide meaningful writing instruction in connection with the reading of informational texts. Calkins (1994) and Wood Ray (2001) advocate teaching students to write through genres. My eighth-graders are familiar with the term *genre*, as we have experienced a variety of genres in reading class. I really wanted my students to understand that genres do not exist within a vacuum, that people create genres and give them power within a system of language (Luke, O’Brien, & Comber, 1994). So often students are taught genre in school, yet they cannot apply what they have learned when confronted with real-life situations that require writing with a specific genre and purpose. Developing this understanding is the transition to using multigenre writing.

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## Using Multi-Genre Writing in the Classroom

My eighth-graders began by discussing how writers choose genre. In small groups, the students created a list of familiar genres, such as comic strips, gossip columns, campaign posters, interviews, advertisements, obituaries, recipes, and magazine articles. We divided our lists into two categories: “possible age-specific genres” and “genres that span age groups.” Interestingly, as we began to discuss our genre lists, we realized that there were big differences between the pieces we read and those we write, such as author age, experiences, and writing ability. We agreed with Romano (2000) that while multigenre writing includes a research focus, writing topics also develop

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from personal experience or personal interests. In small groups, students brainstormed topics about which they were curious and would like to learn more. As students began making decisions about topics, I introduced a variety of materials, from picturebooks to encyclopedias. Most of the stu-

dents chose a topic that focused on a person or historical event.

The research phase lasted two to three weeks, allowing the students freedom to read and become as immersed as possible in a plethora of information; the underly-

ing assumption was that intense reading would make the writing come more easily. Each student proposed a topic to direct their thinking, which helped me provide adequate materials via the school and public libraries. I encouraged students to absorb as much information from as many sources as possible. I provided enough materials for students to work individually during the reading portion of the class period, even though they gathered in small groups. As topics took shape, I asked each student to write a pre-reading/writing piece, sharing all they knew about their topic. At the completion of the project, I would compare this writing with an identical post-reading/writing assignment to assess what knowledge was gained.

A mini-lesson, framed around suggestions from Robb (2004), Allen (2001), and Lattimer (2003), opened each session to keep students focused on ways to gather information. Student journals were divided into two parts for this project: class journal and writer's journal. In the class journal, information gathered in class was recorded, often including a fast write. The fast write was a timed exercise, usually 10–15 minutes, where students wrote after about a half-hour of reading. Fast writes were written quickly, without referring to notes, letting ideas pour onto the paper. We followed Donald Murray's advice: "Put your notes

away before you begin a draft. What you remember is probably what should be remembered; what you forget is probably what should be forgotten" (Murray, 1989, p. 151). Writing was done outside of class. I also encouraged students to add out-of-class research, such as interviews, Internet texts, and videos.

One suggestion I received from the teacher inquiry group was to allow the students to verbalize what they learned as well as write it. In addition to fast writes, retelling was an important step for students in deciphering information. In their small groups, students paired up and, by turn, briefly told each other about what they had read. The retelling enabled students to clarify information and deepen their understanding of the topic. As Calkins notes, "When talk precedes writing it stimulates thinking, allowing students to generate more detailed lists of information and ideas and discover what they know about a topic" (1994, p. 83). On blank bulletin board paper covering a classroom wall, students used markers to write graffiti about their topic, which included quotes, facts, and pictures.

The teacher inquiry group advised the use of a pre- and post-writing test to analyze the content knowledge. Following the selection of topics and prior to researching, I asked my students to free write, listing whatever they could about their chosen topic. I collected a sample of student writing, which I used to compare quantity and quality. After three weeks of researching, I again asked my students to write all they knew about their topic. The post-writing pieces were very revealing. The average number of words rose from 52 to 166, and topics were explained in much greater detail. Information was also more accurate, as it was based on fact rather than speculation. I observed more confidence in students as they approached the task, as well. Jared, a below-level reader with an IEP, had recorded 18 entries in his journal about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. "I've never written that much in my life! And it's all good stuff." Jessica, an above-average reader, had written 32 journal entries about Marilyn Mon-

roe and was eager to turn her collection of facts into writing that she could publish and share with her friends.

I discovered that other teachers in the group who used a similar writing activity to measure information learned during their project also saw impressive growth in their students, both in excitement about their writing and in the quality of their writing. My own inquiry—examining my own teaching—resulted in a difference I would not have discovered on my own; that is, instead of dreading the required research paper, I would now approach it with new momentum. How could my enthusiasm not inspire my students? From the inquiry group experience, I knew I would want to continue the dialogue I had begun with other teachers.

## Understanding How Teacher Inquiry Benefits Students

This new approach to teaching research paper writing turned out to be a breath of fresh air for my students. In the past, students would have spent time scrambling for ways to begin writing their research reports. Giving students the opportunity to choose their own topic and explore it in multiple ways helped them become more emotionally involved with the information. Romano (1995) refers to this immersion as the “optimal psychological experience” (p. 193). Students were now experts and could share something about their topic that the rest of the class did not know. Beyond the simple sharing, they had a strong desire to share it well and in a meaningful way.

### SIDE TRIP: RESEARCH PAPER ALTERNATIVES

With the support of a teacher inquiry group, Wirsing reenvisioned research projects in her classroom, engaging students in multigenre composing as they explore informational texts. Where can you find help if there’s no teacher inquiry group at your school? Try these options:

- Familiarize students with the possibilities of multigenre writing with the ReadWriteThink lesson “Reading and Analyzing Multigenre Texts,” which helps students develop a classroom definition of multigenre texts by exploring a multigenre picture book, short chapter books, and, if desired, multigenre novels. As students share findings and discuss strategies needed to comprehend these texts, they will develop the ways of reading and writing necessary for writing their own multigenre texts. Access the lesson at [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=293](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=293).
- Invite students to explore collaborative research with the ReadWriteThink lesson “Investigating the Holocaust: A Collaborative Inquiry Project.” As students progress through this inquiry project, they explore a variety of resources—texts, images, sounds, photos, and other artifacts—as they learn about the Holocaust. Working collaboratively, they investigate the materials, prepare a response to share orally with the class, and produce a topic-based newspaper to complete their research. The lesson is available online at [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=416](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=416).
- Model texts provide students with structures that can take research from reiteration to true rethinking in the ReadWriteThink lesson “Picture Books as Framing Texts: Research Paper Strategies for Struggling Writers.” In this lesson, picture books give students frames for structuring research projects, freeing them from the language of their encyclopedia sources and allowing them to focus their attention on the content of their papers. Learn more about the strategy at [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=306](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=306)

—Traci Gardner  
[www.readwritethink.org](http://www.readwritethink.org)

Having choice of topic and materials contributed to student enthusiasm by allowing them ownership of their work. On a daily basis, I heard about videos, interviews, websites, and primary sources students discovered in their research, sources I could not have provided for them in the classroom setting. For example, Laurie, a student new to our school who struggled with independent reading, was curious about the number of civilian casualties at the Battle of Gettysburg. I put her in contact with a friend on staff at our town's university library, and together they gleaned actual newspaper articles from the local Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, newspaper written during the time of the battle. Laurie had previously shared with me her insecurity with writing reports, but now her confidence grew as she gathered insight about the people living in Gettysburg during the war. She enjoyed the drafts she had written in her journal and was anxious to share her published writing in the form of a creative nonfiction report.

Other benefits I observed as a result of my teacher inquiry included the following:

- Students were able to understand the concept of a multigenre paper simply by seeing one.
- Mini-lessons helped give meaning to unfamiliar genres, though many genres were already familiar to students.
- Teachers in my inquiry group helped me shape some of my lessons along the way, something I could not have easily done alone.
- Struggling readers gained self-esteem in their ability to work independently. They selected and limited themselves to meaningful topics and took advantage of a multitude of resources outside of the classroom.
- Students read more. Pieces were not written in a chronological order, and conventional devices were not the focus, resulting in more writing. The encouragement I received from the inquiry group challenged me to take risks with my teaching and

assessment methods, with spectacular results.

- Students made choices about what they wrote and how they wrote. They synthesized and reduced their information to key terms, sometimes incorporating visual and performing arts. Problem-solving skills and higher-level thinking skills were utilized.
- Students learned to listen. They collaborated, developing a sense of *show* versus *tell*. They listened critically and questioned each other, in the classroom and on the phone at night. They sought the expertise of their parents (a real breakthrough!) and each other's advice far more often than they sought mine; a community of active learners developed.
- Students openly shared their work with other teachers without fear of criticism.
- Students reflected more and wrote creatively. As they decided how best to translate their research into writing, they sought ways that would be entertaining as well as informative. In addition to their writing, students presented information with costuming, through art and music, and with technology. They breathed life into their work.

Students were eager to share their final drafts. A rubric was used to evaluate each of the five published pieces for content and organization, format and style, mechanics, and process. By student request, oral presentations became an added element in the project. Each student read portions of their writing to the entire class to showers of applause. The students saw themselves as writers.

### Discovering the “What’s in It for Me?”

At the beginning of the project, I had two goals. My first goal was to increase student knowledge with a variety of texts. It was clear that my students at all reading levels had gained knowledge, as I was able to measure with the pre- and post-writing tests. My second goal was to find ways to

help students express their knowledge more creatively. That, too, was a success. Their creativity was evident in their writing, but it went far beyond the writing. I truly could not have predicted that my students would enjoy writing multigenre papers to the degree they did, but perhaps it was because I enjoyed teaching the project far more than I ever had in the past. There was something inviting about the novelty and spontaneity of multigenre writing. The ability to switch genres and be creative appealed to everyone.

Providing choices added emotion to the students' reading and writing, something I could not have predicted. I observed that reading informational texts with the multigenre writing element tapped into my students' natural curiosity to search for facts about their topic while developing research skills they will use the rest of their lives.

As delighted as I was for my students, I was even more so for myself. The original questions I'd had about the inquiry group itself had been resolved: How would the teacher inquiry group help me sustain professional development through the year? Would this process help me be a better teacher? The group helped me devote the time I needed to research and learn while providing me with an ongoing support base, a base that provided suggestions, resources, and a listening and understanding ear. There was strength in numbers; that strength made me willing to take a risk and try something different with the help of others.

Exploring my questions helped me to be a better teacher. The purpose of professional development is, of course, to make us better teachers, but I didn't always know how to use the tools I'd been given at workshops or seminars. I didn't

understand how to connect the information to my students. Teacher inquiry provided the ongoing professional development I needed to dedicate the time to interact with the subject matter—and with a network of teachers, a resource that I know will keep on giving.

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