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OPENING WORDS THE TEACHING LIFE: A JOURNEY, A CHALLENGE, AND A CULTURE

ALLEN WEBB AND JONATHAN BUSH
EDITORS

It is clear from the essays collected here that meaningful professional development is not the one-time delivery of a package to the classroom door. Instead, in this issue we find English language arts teachers engaged in an active process, an interplay over time between practice and theory, individual experience and community reflection. These essays reveal various shapes a language arts teaching career can take and the central role of meaningful professional development in keeping a teaching life vital and evolving. In an era of fixed objectives and testing, increasing top-down administration of teacher activity, and intensive marketing of prepackaged professional development materials and programs, the essays in this collection present a remarkable counternarrative, a testimony to the authenticity, flexibility, and contextual growth of teachers collaborating with each other to improve their knowledge, skills, and commitment. Taken together, these essays set forward a rich and various roadmap to professional development for teachers of English.

The first four essays are studies of effective professional development practices — all of them rooted in the establishment of a teaching community. “The Class Menagerie” reports on the evolution of the professional development practices of a group of writing center tutors. Here professional development occurs in a dialogue between the lore of their experiences as writing tutors and the public and evolving theory of best practices in writing facilitation.

In “Thinking Locally, Acting Globally,” Cathy Fleischer describes the establishment of an on-line professional development program intended to

value teacher knowledge and collaboration. She describes the way one group of teachers utilizes NCTE’s new Co-Learn initiative to authentically reflect on their teaching practices.

The National Writing Project has been one of the most successful professional development undertakings. The essay “Seeing Professional Development Through Teachers’ Eyes” about the Red Cedar Writing Project at Michigan State University shows why. Here the process by which teachers become empowered as writers in the context of a teaching-learning community extends to a wide variety of activities beyond the initial summer institute.

Patricia Wachholz and Lois Christensen put forward a model of classroom research as a vital form of professional development, one that begins with respect for teacher knowledge and ability. Rather than the teacher as scientist alone in her classroom, they emphasize community support in developing appropriate and effective research. As these teacher researchers share their results at conferences and in professional publications, the very process of research turns classroom teachers into professional leaders.

Next a series of essays looks at professional development experiences in those crucial first years in the profession. Developing a self-conception as an effective teacher is vital to survival in the classroom. Given the disturbing statistic that 50% of new teachers leave the profession in five years, Janet Alsup is vitally concerned with the way new teachers negotiate the complex discourses that create consciousness of a new personal and professional identity. Nancy Joseph examines the challenges that intern teachers address as their illusions of themselves as teachers come face to face with reality. She charts the development of professional and personal balance that facilitates accepting and teaming under the leadership of their experienced mentor teachers.

Jill VanAntwerp is concerned with the transition from intern teaching to the first year on the job. She works closely with a cohort of new teachers who share ideas via a list serve and face to face

meetings. Supported by a grant Jill writes, these new teachers are given much needed support to attend professional meetings and conferences.

In “Mentoring New Teachers Toward Leadership” Doug Baker extols the role of special conferences focused for teachers early in their careers. These events allow new teachers to reconnect theory and research they learned in their preparation to the overwhelming practice they are immersed in. The conferences he describes also invite new teachers into professional leadership roles. In “Toward a Philosophy of Effective Mentorship” Julie Mix describes the emergence into professional leadership of a group of young minority teachers. Mentoring of these teachers leads them to develop an enviable record of conference participation and publication.

Entering and developing in the profession are the focus of the next group of essays. In “One Page or Two” the authors address one of the hardest first questions of the English teacher’s job search. Their thoughtful analysis of the process of writing a resume looks closely at preservice teachers coming to recognize and value their multiple experiences and strengths—much needed sample resumes are provided.

Julie Robinson describes the value of one’s own observations and writing about the classroom. Teacher journaling, development of teaching portfolios, reading narratives of classroom research, and publishing to the profession and the community emerge from this kind of reflective professional life.

“Stoking the Fire” describes how individual teachers can create the links for professional development outside of their own school districts or university graduate programs. A variety of resources and opportunities, including National Board Certification, make it possible for language arts teachers to step beyond isolation and take ownership of their professional development.

The last two essays are evocative pieces looking back on professional development from the perspective of long and full teaching lives. Pam Buchanan describes how professional organizations and the collaboration of thoughtful colleagues played

specific roles as her own career underwent changes and evolution, keeping her teaching life alive thirty years in. Beth Duncan and Elaine O’Quinn set forward what they consider the most important lesson of their development as professionals, a humility that takes them off the classroom stage and allows them to culture the ability to listen carefully to their students.

As we appreciate the voices and ideas that populate this issue of LAJM, we look forward to our next two issues: Fall/Winter 2004, which focuses on “Reading Matters,” and Spring/Summer 2005, a companion issue titled “Writing Matters.” In these issues, we are looking for articles from scholars, teachers, and reflective practitioners at all levels who can enhance our community’s understanding of writing, reading, and literacy.