2004

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Two years ago, Kent Williamson, Executive Director of NCTE, called with a question and a request: NCTE had been thinking for some time about how to create professional development programs that are true to the ideals that have been established for effective continuing teacher education. Among these principles (according to the CEE Commission on Inservice Education) are these: that inservice education must engage teachers in reflective practice; that teachers should have ownership and agency in inservice education, resulting in collaborative decision-making; that inservice education should engage teachers in theorized practice; that teachers must have sufficient time for thoughtful reflection; and that districts must offer explicit and tangible support to participating teachers.

Beyond that, Kent was intrigued by the notion of some kind of online component to this professional development—but not simply an online course with decontextualized assignments and due dates. Could we, he wondered, create professional development opportunities for teachers across the country by making use of the benefits of online communication, without sacrificing the principles of professional development to which NCTE is committed: reflection, ownership, collaboration, time, and support? And would I be willing to work on such a project?

I have to admit—his call both intrigued and concerned me. For a long time I have been actively involved in inquiry-based professional development, mostly in teacher research groups pursuing questions of particular and local interest. In the last few years, though, I have become increasingly concerned that what has made these groups so significant to individual teachers—their very contextual nature—might, perhaps, be limiting their reach. In other words, the significant changes in teaching and learning that arise out of teacher research groups tend to remain local: within one teacher's classroom, or, on some occasions, within a school or district. However, at the same time that these powerful small-scale learning experiences have resulted in phenomenal teacher change, the world around us has begun publicly dismissing such localized knowledge, instead celebrating large scale, so-called "scientifically-based" research. While that mode of study is so problematic for numerous reasons,[1](and in fact is part of the very tradition that teacher research has rejected), its appeal to the media, the legislature, and the public at large has been undeniable—in part because of its claims to demonstrate how *all* students learn. About the time of Kent's call, I had begun thinking seriously about how teachers' knowledge, based in their own systematic studies of classrooms, has been omitted from the important conversations about school reform. What could *we* do, I'd been wondering, first, to find ways to make more connections among these powerful and multiple accounts and then to have these many localized studies become more public. If we could do so, we might be able to present an alternative and promising view of educational reform, one based in the real portraits of real classrooms, one that celebrates and includes the voices of practicing teachers.

It was with this mindset that I began to think carefully about Kent's proposal. Could an online professional development project, designed well, start to meet this challenge? Could we capture what is the essence of inquiry-based professional development, done at a local level, but expand its reach through conversations among teachers across the country as they share their challenges, their concerns, and ultimately their successes? What could we gain if we were able to do so? Could we find a way to tap the power of thousands of teachers'

voices all reporting from their local circumstances so that we could enter the conversation on school reform? Could this help us change the tenor of that conversation?

Soon I became caught up in the excitement and the potential of this project and was able to assemble that first year a group of noted teacher researchers and scholars from across the country to collaboratively design what CoLEARN might look like.[2] Coming together in an intensive summer workshop and then through multiple email conversations, this group created a design for CoLEARN which drew upon a structured, yet flexible format, inviting teachers to participate in some specific online writings, but making sure that teachers' own local contexts would be at the center of their work. This original design has undergone a year of revision to its current form—and has emerged as an important addition to the choices for professional development for teachers and schools—with this year's focus on the area of writing pedagogy. What remains constant in CoLEARN are its commitments to certain principles: that inquiry is at the center of any professional development, that teachers need time to reflect and collaborate, that teachers' own questions must serve as a starting point, and that this kind of professional development can lead to changed practice.

Writing CoLEARN
This year I serve as Content Leader for the CoLEARN Writing Initiative, designed to support, in part, NCTE's multi-year commitment to improve writing in schools across the country. The CoLEARN website offers teachers a number of resources designed to help them reflect on their own beliefs about writing and writing instruction; learn new strategies for teaching writing; and investigate how student writers respond to their approaches[3]. Among the resources on the site are the following:

· *Reading invitations* with links to full text articles and with accompanying questions teachers may use to jumpstart discussion;

· *Writing engagements* which invite teachers to respond to specific prompts about some aspect of writing pedagogy;

· *Online conversations* with prominent writers, composition scholars and teachers which offer participating teachers an opportunity to ask questions and learn from some of their favorite authors;

· *Professional readings*, over 2000 of them, taken from NCTE's many journals and books and searchable by title, author, or topic of inquiry;

· *Online communities*, where teachers can discuss the readings, writings, and reflections on their teaching with other teachers across the country.

Overlaying all these resources is a structure that invites teachers to immerse themselves in professional development. The structure has been carefully designed to be flexible, keeping in mind the individual needs of teachers in their local contexts—so teachers can chose the path they take through CoLEARN, depending on their interests and underlying questions. At the heart of this structure are two overlapping areas: (1) *Phases of Development*, designed to lead teachers through a process of thinking about, themselves as writers, themselves as teachers of writing, and their students as writers; and (2) *Strands of Study*, designed to encourage teachers to conduct their own deep study within a particular area of writing pedagogy. This year the strands of study are Writing as a Tool for Thinking and Learning; Assessing Writing to Support and Account for Student Learning; and Parents and Others as Partners in Students' Literacy Learning. Within each strand are a number of specific reading invitations and writing engagements to give teachers a place to begin their study.

So, how might a group of teachers, committed to professional development, use CoLEARN? Let me share some brief moments from a group that I am a part of, the Eastern Michigan Writing Project Teacher Research Group which is in its second year of using CoLEARN as the organizing tool for its monthly meetings[4]. Our group has selected the second strand—Assessing Writing to Support and

Account for Student Learning—as our area of study, based on continuing questions and issues that have been arising for the members over the past few years.

For our second meeting this year, the group chose to read ahead of time an article from the second strand which focused on how to remain true to what we consider best practices in writing instruction even as we work to prepare students for mandated writing tests. Our discussion after reading the article (as recorded and posted on the CoLEARN Discussion Board by our group leader Jennifer Buehler) showed our group's penchant to use the readings as merely a jumping off point for discussion:

> Although our team's conversation began in response to the article "Teaching *True* and *To* the Test in Writing," stories of our own experiences with writing as teachers and as students soon took precedence. The notion that students need a common language to speak about writing was one that we'd discussed in previous team conversations, but this time, we talked more explicitly about the challenges we face in developing and articulating that language in our schools. Tim said we need to empower students with understandings about writing that they can adapt to different situations, which Gloria likened to teaching spelling rules. "Teach them the basics," she said, "audience, voice, and purpose" in the context of genre. Cathy quickly commented that "the basics" as Gloria described them are not what the public thinks of as basics. Kim added that even departments don't have consensus on what constitutes the basics. Tim suggested that's because English teachers don't come to their jobs as writers. Rather, they come to the profession because of a love of literature, and writing is a handcuffing element. That helps to explain the rigid rules of some teachers, such as Tim's colleague who insists that the thesis statement must be the first sentence of every paper. In cases like this one, students may learn to make Mr. X

happy, but they don't necessarily gain enduring understandings about writing.

This is pretty much the way our discussions go: The reading propels our thinking into particular areas of concern for us; rarely do we stay focused on the written text, but rather its "content" becomes part of the tapestry which surrounds our thinking.

After a while, we turned the discussion slightly, focusing on our written responses to one of the writing engagements included on the website, a writing engagement that asked us to think back to our own experiences as writers who were assessed by others:

Papers Handed Back:

Purpose: All of us have had the experience of receiving a paper back from a teacher—and scanning it immediately to look for both the grade and the comments. Trying to remember what that moment felt like can help us relate to the feelings our own students have as we too hand back their papers.

Try to recall a particular moment when you received a paper back from a teacher, remembering as many specifics as you can about the occasion. Think about the following questions and write a short narrative about the experience:

1. What was the content of the paper you wrote? What was the genre?
2. Was it a paper you cared about?
3. How did you feel about the paper before you handed it in?
4. Were there comments on the paper? What kinds of comments? Where were they written on the paper?
5. Was there a grade on the paper?
6. How did you feel when you received the paper back? Did it encourage you to write more or shut you down?
7. Was there an opportunity to respond to the feedback?
8. Did you develop particular work habits as a result of the feedback.
9. What do you notice about your students' response when you hand back their papers? Are their reactions like yours?

As Jennifer again reports on our conversation:
When we turned to our responses to the writing invitation about papers handed back, each of us had discouraging stories to tell. Kim related an experience she had in college where as a senior in the honors program, she got an English paper back marked "C+/B- -". Not only did she struggle to decipher what that borderline grade meant, but she struggled to read her professor's handwriting as well. Her professor agreed to meet with her to discuss the paper, and he allowed her to rewrite it, which she did. She earned an A- on the rewrite, but what she learned was that her opinion about the main character in the novel was not his opinion. Was this the reason for her low grade? Cathy related an experience of getting a B- on a paper as a sophomore in college, but the professor went beyond commenting on the paper to tell her that her writing was so bad, her thoughts of being an English major were misinformed. She told us, "I'd been successful as a writer my whole life, but at the time, all that mattered was that one comment." My experience of earning a C on my first college paper on the *Iliad* simply confirmed for me what I had feared—that I had nothing to say about that text, and likely any classic literary text. The professor's comments were brief, cryptic, and unhelpful. Looking back, I can see that first semester as the point where I began turning away from English as a major. I chose American Studies instead, and now I think I made my way back to the English classroom because of the positive experiences I had in high school and in spite of the negative experiences I had in college.

As we shared these stories, Cathy commented, "And we're confident about writing. What about the kids who aren't? No wonder they crumple up the papers they get back and throw them away."

Again, our response here demonstrates a fairly typical move for our group: We read and talk about the stories inspired by the writing engagement, and we then turn that discussion toward what our shared understandings now tell us about students in our classrooms (which run from elementary to college).

Our group demonstrates one way of approaching our professional development through the CoLEAN site, an idiosyncratic way, perhaps, but one that works for us: monthly discussions which rely on our preparation for the topic by reading and writing; discussions that are often free flowing and off topic, but that help establish our beliefs about writing and which allow us to start to revise our stances in the company of others. As we continue with our meetings, we'll next begin to focus on our own writing pedagogy, using various reading invitations and writing engagements from the site that seem on target with our needs as a group: For next month's meeting we're conducting a "teaching dig" around our classrooms where we try to uncover as many artifacts of our assessment approaches as we can, stopping to reflect on what they mean; later in the semester, we'll begin to focus on a particular assessment strategy we find challenging, do some reading on that strategy, and try to rethink what we might do in the classroom. Then we'll focus on a particular student or two and study their responses to that strategy: by keeping observation notes, collecting artifacts, and interviewing the students.

CoLEARN Writing provides numerous articles and writing engagements, lots of questions to support discussion, and a vast array of resources to help teachers continue their growth. But at its essence, it's really all about providing teachers with time and an occasion to reflect and to inquire together. Our hope remains that as teachers do so, their conversations will not only help them locally but will help all of us discover what teachers really are worrying about, how they are challenging themselves to get better, and what kinds of student learning occur as a result of their study. All of us who teach students have stories to tell; by amassing these stories, perhaps we can help others understand what really goes on in schools.

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Footnotes

[1] Most recent critiques of this stance come in response to the National Reading Panel's endorsement of what it names as scientifically-based research as the sole criterion for endorsing some and not other studies about reading pedagogy. For more on this, see McCrackin, Altweger et al, and Yatvin, among others.

[2] [The teacher-scholars who participated in this group include the following: Linda Adler-Kassner, Todd DeStigter, Anne Haas Dyson, Curt Dudley-Marling, Carole Edelsky, Pat Enciso, Cecilia Espinosa, Heidi Estrem, Colleen Fairbanks, Bob Fecho, Dana Fox, Karen Gallas, Jeff Grabill, Sarah Hudelson, Susan Lytle, Ernest Morrell, Tom Philion, Cathy Reischl, Sarah Robbins, Laura Roop, David Schaafmsa, Karen Smith, Patricia Stock, Janet Swenson, Antonio Tendero, Gwen Williams, Diane Zigo, and Leah Zuidema. The original 3-day meeting was sponsored by The Center for the Scholarship of Teaching, the College of Arts and Letters, and the Office of the Vice Provost for Research in Michigan State University.

[3] For more information about subscribing to CoLEARN, contact the CoLEARN office at NCTE at colearn@ncte.org or 800-369-6283, extensions 3609.

[4] Members of our group include Tim Authier, Jennifer Buehler, Shirley Eagan, Lisa Eddy, Denise Finnerty, Sarah Lorenz, Fran Marroquin, Kim Pavloch, Gloria Shirey, Tracy Speaker, Sue Stindt, and Jennifer Walsh.

About the Author:
Cathy Fleischer is a professor of English at Eastern Michigan University, where she co-directs the Eastern Michigan Writing Project. She also is co-editor of *English Education* and the Content Leader for the CoLEARN Writing Initiative.