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STOKING THE FIRE: MAKING YOUR WAY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Professional development may not be the first thing newer teachers think of; most are concerned with learning their students' names and personalities, learning about the cultures of the schools and communities in which they work/live, and learning to balance the paper load with continued excellence in teaching while promoting effective communication with parents. However, teachers new to the field (in their first three years of teaching or so) should be made aware of the many benefits – emotional, social, and cognitive – of professional development opportunities. While professional development is often offered by school districts and universities, there are many excellent professional development opportunities that individual teachers can pursue on their own.

Benefits of Professional Development

Engaging in professional development can improve our lives as English or Language Arts teachers in many ways. Cognitively, we benefit from thinking about how we do what we do. We can learn new strategies involved in teaching a piece of literature or find different ways of approaching sentence combining to help us rethink the decisions we make in the classroom and push us to consider multiple perspectives when preparing lessons.

Professional development also offers us perspective and insight as it opens up new ideas, and even to new feelings about old ideas. Taking stock of where we are in our careers, planning specific ways to spend time improving our teaching methods, and reflecting on what we do in our classrooms is emotionally rewarding. Professional development activities can help us acknowledge areas in which we

want to continue to grow; furthermore, they can renew our satisfaction and pride in our work.

Professional development also offers social benefits. So often we teach in isolation, especially during our first few years when we spend much of our time scrambling to develop lessons, locate resources, reading textbooks and responding to student writing, or creating lesson plans. Professional development activities provide us a chance to talk and to spend time with other teachers. In my third year of teaching 7th and 8th grade at an in-service at the regional education center, I was not only encouraged to spend time exploring new computer technology with my fellow English/Language Arts teachers but also given a whole hour to converse with my colleagues over lunch. The other 7th grade English teacher, Kim David, and I ended up talking about our love of Arthurian legends at that lunch. Later, we were inspired to create a unit plan based on “The Sword and The Stone” to co-teach the following spring (I still use that unit plan as an example of cooperative teaching/learning with my methods students at Northern Michigan University). Having time to share ideas, to ask questions, and to experience new approaches to teaching is the most noteworthy advantage of professional development opportunities at all levels.

Professional Development Opportunities at the National Level

Most English/Language Arts teachers should be familiar with the mother ship: NCTE (the National Council of Teachers of English). NCTE has recently adopted new technology on its site (<http://www.ncte.org>)** that allows members to access articles online, to get up-to-date specifics about conventions and other professional development opportunities, and to access information related to the teaching of literature, poetry, writing, grammar, speaking and listening, etc.

*** (For more information on NCTE's innovative CoLEARN initiative, see Cathy Fleischer's "Thinking Locally, Acting Globally" article on ppg.15-19).*

Groups such as the International Reading Association (<http://www.reading.org/>) and TESOL (<http://www.tesol.edu/>) regularly provide information about conferences, texts, courses, and trends in the teaching of reading and ESL.

Another means of professional development I'd recommend for individuals to consider during their third or fourth year of teaching is certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (<http://www.nbpts.org>). I was certified by NBPTS in Early Adolescence - English/Language Arts in 1995. The National Board notes that teachers, as professionals, "possess expert knowledge, but often confront unique, problematic situations that do not lend themselves to formulaic solutions. [They] must cultivate the ability to cope with the unexpected and act wisely in the face of uncertainty" ("What Teachers Should Know" 12).

The ational certification process is itself an opportunity for professional growth; teachers seeking NBPTS certification explore their subject knowledge, reflect on their decisions, and consider the pedagogical implications of their responses to students' work (among other activities). Nationally certified teachers are guided through the process of constructing a comprehensive teaching portfolio, which should appeal to those interested in the writing-to-learn movement.

Opportunities for Professional Development at the State Level in Michigan

The state of Michigan is replete with professional development opportunities for English teachers. For instance, the state affiliate of NCTE, the Michigan Council of Teachers of English, offers two annual conventions: one in the fall and the spring. The fall meeting provided me with countless chances for professional growth the three times I've attended: I learned the latest information about the MEAP test from Department of Education experts; I talked to colleagues in English Education at the college level and discovered new resources for my methods courses; I heard from famous authors such as Christopher Paul Curtis, who read from his forthcoming book and reminded us why we love

(teaching and) reading; I met elementary and secondary teachers who shared lesson plans with me or inspired me to do research in various areas (e.g., academic service learning; literature circles; invented spelling; technology and the teaching of writing, etc.); I spent the eight-hour drive from Marquette to Lansing talking to my mentor, Tom Hyslop, about English Education and assignments in my young adult literature course; et cetera. I believe that school districts in Michigan should send each English/Language Arts teacher to at least one professional conference per year. We must communicate with our partners in education if we are to make a difference in Michigan's future.

Finally, there are several sites that offer professional development opportunities for English/Language Arts teachers in Michigan. Here are just a few more I can name:

- Michigan Teacher Network: <http://mtn.merit.edu/palm/palmpdevents.html>
- Michigan's Department of Education: http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-6525_6530_6568-33657--,00.html (which lists some wonderful resources as well as links on professional development)
- Michigan Federation of Teachers and School-Related Personnel: <http://www.mftsrp.org/professional.html>

Professional Development at the Local Level

Two ideas come to mind for teachers who either can't travel, don't want to go back to school, or just need to find something closer to home. First, we need to remember that many Michigan educational service districts offer professional development events/resources. The Department of Education Web site (<http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,1607,7-140-5373-78090--,00.html>) provides a great list of these agencies. One example I found helpful was Gratiot-Isabella RESD's Web site at <http://www.edzone.net/pdbook/>. Just by reading about these workshops, I discovered ways to reflect on my teaching.

Finally, our greatest resources are often found in our own backyards: talk to the people in

your school about what you are doing in your classes; ask your mentor or a fellow teacher to view a videotape of you teaching and to write a peer response/critique. Visit with a teacher at a different grade level and compare notes about teaching reading or strategies for classroom management during writing groups; or leave a copy of Language Arts Journal of Michigan in the teacher's lounge for someone else to read. Start a book club (Parker Palmer's The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life is a great one to start with!). Journal with your students about your latest lesson plan. Surf the net looking for new teaching strategies for Romeo and Juliet or Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf.

And remember, if you are engaged in professional development, your students will benefit, your teaching will improve, and your rekindled spirit might even spark the interest of a colleague who has forgotten the exhilaration that can be experienced as a result of continued growth as a professional educator.

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