

# The Heinemann Fellows

## Reflections from Our First Class

Two years ago, ten educators from across the United States were selected to form the first class of Heinemann Fellows. They represented a cross section of content areas and brought diverse experiences and perspectives to their work. And, through focused action research projects, observations, and continued sharing via articles and blogs, they have become part of the fabric of Heinemann. As the second cohort of Heinemann Fellows launches for 2016-2018, our first class reflect on their insightful journeys.



Ellin Oliver Keene  
Chairperson,  
The Heinemann Fellows

Front row, L-R: Amy Greenbaum Clark, Kate Norem, Julie Nora, Tamara Ward,  
Back row, L-R: Lorilee Cabrera Liberato, Jessica Lifshitz, Sascha Robinett, Michael Pershan, Valerie Geschwind, Lisa Birno, Ellin Keene



## Lisa Birno

Literacy Coach, Eden Prairie Public Schools, Eden Prairie, Minnesota

*“Pursuing an action research plan through the Heinemann Fellows has changed me as a teacher. This work has shown me the power of truly reflective practice.”*

My journey as a Heinemann Fellow has been rich, challenging, and rewarding. My action research centers on the power of teachers’ intentional instructional practices to bring about change in the classroom. During my first year of work, I examined how the use of purposeful talk can promote equity and intellectual engagement with my sixth-grade class. I was eager to see the impact of this intentional use of purposeful talk, but I never anticipated how much depth it would bring to our classroom as my students and I focused on the power of our collaborative conversations.

When I moved to an instructional coaching position this year, my Heinemann action research project expanded and focused on how teaching practices change as a result of reflective coaching. This broader perspective allows me to discover the impact of collegial collaboration centered on students’ learning.

Pursuing an action research plan through the Heinemann Fellows has changed me as a teacher. This work has shown me the power of truly reflective practice. It’s something I’ll carry with me forever.



## Lorilee Cabrera Liberato

Cornerstone Literacy Coach,  
Springfield, Massachusetts

*“I have learned to become adaptive to respond to the changing needs and goals of students, teachers, coaches, and other district staff and to be present in every situation.”*

I am tempted to say that the journey began about two years ago with the call saying I had been chosen as part of the first Heinemann Fellows group, but that isn’t completely accurate. My journey began thirty-eight years ago with the decisions my parents made about my upbringing and education. I grew up in a household where the main goal was to provide me with the opportunities to which they never had access.

Providing access has become my passion. I have devoted my career to doing this in several capacities, as teacher and as coach. My action research focused on supporting teachers in becoming reflective and effective practitioners, and it has led to immense personal growth.

I have learned to become adaptive to respond to the changing needs and goals of students, teachers, coaches, and other district staff and to be present in every situation, listening to people’s needs and asking the right questions to promote reflection. I have also learned that my best coaching begins with a quiet determination to stay true to my principles and beliefs.



## Amy Greenbaum Clark

English Teacher, Christ Episcopal  
School, Covington, Louisiana

*“The heart of my classroom is the voice of my students. My hope as their teacher is to assist them in discovering the power of their own voice and a means to share it with others.”*

At first, I thought I was simply seeking to investigate the role poetry might play in developing student writers. The connections to student voice in writing were obvious to me, and I sought to deepen my understanding and to offer my students more meaningful ways to interact with poetry. Yet, as I proceeded, I realized I was neglecting aspects of aiding my kids in discovering the power of their voice.

And that was when my project shifted. I then began investigating how trusting students with choice in the classroom not only empowers them as learners and writers but also offers more profound opportunities for engagement in the classroom.

The heart of my classroom is the voice of my students. My hope as their teacher is to assist them in discovering the power of their own voice and a means to share it with others. This is the center of my research—research that began in my time as a Heinemann Fellow and that will continue into the future.



## Valerie Geschwind

Staff Developer, Teacher's College  
Reading and Writing Project,  
Columbia University,  
New York, New York

*"We can celebrate the unknown and believe that the journey to discovery will be more powerful than a curriculum, a standard, a 'right' answer."*

If you've spent time with a toddler, you've probably been subject to an endless stream of questions. Research suggests that these questions decrease with age as a result of well-intended but limiting adult responses. Although I continue to consider how to foster innate curiosity in children in my role as a staff developer, I have been left wondering: How do we foster curiosity in educators?

I set out to study the impact of teacher-conducted action research on student growth in an academic or social area. I found that the largest hurdle was supporting educators in identifying a question to study. Just as adult response to toddlers can inadvertently squash curiosity, too many teachers believe they need to have the "right" answer. I realized that we need to help teachers feel safe to generate questions around their own inquiry.

How can we foster curiosity among teachers? We can encourage questioning. We can reflect alongside teachers. We can celebrate the unknown and believe that the journey to discovery will be more powerful than a curriculum, a standard, a "right" answer.



## Jessica Lifshitz

Fifth-Grade Teacher, Meadowbrook  
Elementary School, Northbrook,  
Illinois

*"My students and I now search for ways to give meaning to the work that we do and, whenever we can, we make sure that the meaning of our work goes beyond the walls of our classroom."*

I began my action research by examining the best instructional strategies to help my students create student-generated reading goals that focused more on the quality of their thinking than on the quantity of their reading. This led me to learn to listen to my students differently and to keep them at the very center of our work. It also led me to search for ways of learning that felt more authentic and purposeful to both me and my students. This action research has sent ripples through every aspect of my teaching as I began to work with my students to craft more authentic and purposeful learning experiences.

My students and I now search for ways to give meaning to the work that we do and, whenever we can, we make sure that the meaning of our work goes beyond the walls of our classroom. I might have started by looking at student-written reading goals, but I ended up looking at every instructional decision that I make through a lens of authenticity.



## Julie Nora

Director, International Charter School, Pawtucket, Rhode Island

*"I learned that students are more engaged when they blog for authentic audiences and purposes, that many students do not have access to technology at home and as a society we need to address this issue."*

I began the Heinemann Fellows journey knowing a lot. I knew I was seeking professional growth in a new setting. I knew mentors and other educators would share their expertise and push me to reconsider my practice. I knew I wanted to share what I have learned in the diverse, dual language environment of my school. I knew I would investigate how to integrate Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in meaningful ways.

Although I knew a lot when I started this journey, I had no idea how much I would learn. I learned that students are more engaged when they blog for authentic audiences and purposes, that many students do not have access to technology at home and as a society we need to address this issue. I learned that teachers need to develop their own skills to teach students ICT, that teachers will integrate ICT in meaningful and creative ways, and that students and teachers learn a tremendous amount from their peers.





## Kate Norem

Literacy Coach and Reading Specialist, John Muir Elementary School, Seattle, Washington

*“My students are completely engrossed in their writing when they are given the freedom and responsibility to choose their topic, genre, and mode.”*

Whether they are creating a play to perform as a gift, collaborating on a song to teach younger kids about composting, or writing an encyclopedia of bacteria for a high school biology class, my students are completely engrossed in their writing when they are given the freedom and responsibility to choose their topic, genre, and mode. These instances are meaningful to the students in a way that my teacher-selected, genre-driven writing units simply are not. Therefore, my inquiry has centered on the question, “What purposeful choices can students make that impact the quality of their writing and what teacher moves best support these choices?”

As I have implemented more choice within my writer’s workshop, I have documented changes in both the quantity and quality of the students’ work. However, the most powerful change has come from the questions that I am asked numerous times throughout the school day: “Is it writing time yet?” “Can I bring my writing to recess?,” and “How long do we get to write for today?”

As a teacher of both intermediate and primary grades, I observe again and again that my students are most engaged in their writing when they are given choice over more than just their topic.



## Michael Pershan

Math Teacher, Saint Ann’s School, New York, New York

*“Our students learn from feedback when they actively reflect on that feedback—and we have to support them in this work.”*

When I took algebra, the only feedback was whether my test answers were right or wrong. We can do better than this, but how? My research concerns improving feedback in math classes. At first, I worked on improving the quality of the feedback I gave my students. I soon discovered that comments that merely point out errors are ineffective. Instead, they need to express support for the student while making a very specific mathematical request. (“I love how you . . . Can you try . . . ?” is a sturdy format.)

As I dug deeper, I found that improving comments is not enough. Even the best comments often fail to support learning. Our students learn from feedback when they actively reflect on that feedback, and we have to support them in this work.

Learning can be improved by integrating feedback into larger routines of instruction that start with assessment and end with student reflection. I have found revision to be a particularly powerful routine: collect the work, discuss it together, return with comments, and revise in class with support.



## Sascha Robinett

Principal and School Cofounder, Milagro Charter School, Los Angeles, California

*“After experiencing what a performance-driven evaluation system can do to the morale and growth of a dedicated teacher, I knew that as an administrator, I needed to develop an alternative process.”*

My inquiry as a Heinemann Fellow has been based on the theory that teachers will be more effective at serving their students’ needs if they are supported in taking charge of their own growth and change. Many current teacher evaluation systems focus solely on teacher performance, making the need for growth a professional liability.

After experiencing what a performance-driven evaluation system can do to the morale and growth of a dedicated teacher, I knew that as an administrator, I needed to develop an alternative process. For the last two years, I have been working with

my teachers to develop their own action research projects as an alternative method for gathering data on their effectiveness. Once their research is established, they are supported in their efforts to understand the impact on students.

As a school, we have gone from loathing our evaluation process to being inspired and excited by our own growth and change. In my experience, the best teachers are those who know that learning, growing, and changing are vital components of their professional success.



## Tamara Ward

Principal, Creston School, Kalispell, Montana

*“This search led me to implement a multidisciplinary learning block that encompasses literacy, social studies, and science, in which the students and I cocreate authentic learning opportunities.”*

I teach in a small school of less than eighty kids in rural Montana, which is a glorious but sometimes messy assignment. In this setting, I often have smaller class sizes, but I also face the daily challenges of a multigrade classroom and the isolation that comes from having no grade-level colleagues. I am always searching for effective strategies and solutions.

This search led me to implement a multidisciplinary learning block that encompasses literacy, social studies, and science, in which the students and I cocreate authentic learning opportunities. Students are no longer inundated by isolated,

skill-based instruction but engaged in reading, writing, discussing, and questioning. This increased exposure to higher-level, content-specific vocabulary caused me to question whether this approach would help students transfer vocabulary into their writing and speaking.

After collecting and analyzing my data, the findings were clear. Not only are students engaged in meaningful learning tasks immersed in richer content-area vocabulary, they are also able to transfer this knowledge into their writing and speaking as they make sense of the world around them.

**To continue to engage with the Heinemann Fellows, visit [heinemann.com/fellows](http://heinemann.com/fellows) and follow the hashtag #HFellows. The Heinemann Fellows are also participating in our Teaching & Learning Community Facebook Group. Join them and other colleagues at [Hein.Pub/PD/TLC](https://www.facebook.com/Hein.Pub/PD/TLC).**

## Introducing the 2016-2018 Heinemann Fellows

Front row, left to right: **Kimberly Parker**, English teacher, The Cambridge Rindge & Latin School, Cambridge, MA; **Tiana Silvas**, fourth grade teacher, PS 59, New York, NY; **Katie Charner-Laird**, principal, Cambridgeport School, Cambridge, MA; **Hollis Scott**, fifth grade teacher, Montair Elementary School, Danville, CA; **Kate Flowers**, English teacher, Santa Clara High School, Santa Clara, CA.

Back row, left to right: **Chris Hall**, fifth and seventh grade teacher, Oyster River Middle School, Durham, NH; **Aeriale Johnson**, second grade teacher, Joseph & Olinga Gregory Elementary School, Kalskag, AK; **Ian Fleischer**, elementary school teacher, New Franklin School, Portsmouth, NH; **Tricia Ebarvia**, English teacher, Conestoga High School, Berwyn, PA; **Anna Osborn**, reading specialist, Jefferson Middle School, Columbia, MO; **Kent Haines**, seventh and eighth grade math teacher, Simmons Middle School, Hoover, AL.

