

Professional Development

*Wise methods of teaching do not come from our genes alone
but from out communities of practice.*

—LUCY CALKINS

Professional development, that essential time for teachers to work toward developing an understanding of best practices in the subject they teach, is something I seek. I can't depend on my school district to provide the time or the inspiration; the district will never have the resources to provide rich opportunities in every subject area, and our time on workshop day is quickly consumed with important, although uninspiring, trivia like learning a new schoolwide grading program or a behavior management system that might reign in the wildness of youth. I have to commit time outside of school to develop my thinking; it's one more thing that makes my work week longer, but it's essential. If I don't continue to seek new understandings for this work, I'll relax into complacency and my students will suffer. So here is what works to sustain me and what I'll discuss in this section:

- My teachers' writing group
- A writing professional learning community
- Current journals and books and discussing them with colleagues
- Experiments with current technology
- Conferences and workshops

Each of these elements brings energy to my work. Most are free.

TEACHERS' WRITING GROUP

The story of my writing group is on the DVD. It's a few colleagues, steam rising from fresh coffee, and a few drafts. Once in a while we have cookies. I'm suddenly surrounded by friends who know important things about me, which is all too rare at work. We read each other's writing and underline things we want to talk about, highlight confusions, and celebrate lines we love. We enter a dance with the writer between intent and vision and the thinking behind the writing. It is rich, lasting learning for all of us. There's a rush of fresh ideas: Sylvie tries a sestina, and even though I haven't written one since I was a teenager, I suddenly see possibility in the form. It could speak—the way hers has—of something in my classroom I'm trying to explain. Sylvie takes a risk, so I want to. And there's the beauty of understanding writing more deeply when something that confuses me suddenly becomes clear. In writers' group we are on an authentic search for understanding. It prepares us well to work with drafts from student writers.

On the DVD the writing group gathers just as we would on any Thursday afternoon. We have read each other's work just before the cameras started. We rarely spend more than a few minutes reading before we begin. You'll see Kathleen arrive late and Carrie leave early. There is no formality in our meetings. Each writer shares a bit and we question, wonder, celebrate, and think hard about what the writer is trying to say and how we can help. Then we move on to another piece. I've written twice about my writing group (*Public Teaching* and *Inside Writing*) so this time we filmed one session and then interviewed the teachers several weeks later. I hope you'll take a minute and watch how we work.

As I said in *Inside Writing*, "My writing group is the single most important professional development experience I've had as a teacher. No national conference compares, no book has taught me as much, no district workshop has ever had as big an impact on my daily growth as a teacher. Four or five teachers in

Real change in education is not brought about alone, in single classrooms, by individual teachers. It is brought about when we teachers engage in the literacies we are teaching, when we look back on the work of our students and at our notes and interpretations, when we realize the importance of the role of teacher as developer of classroom practices. When we do that together as colleagues—in all disciplines—we bring about dramatic change.

—KAREN ERNST

a room with a few rough drafts create conversations that probe for meaning, that teach the process from the inside. Although the writing is recursive—one draft becomes another piece entirely, a revision leads back to a former draft—this experience of writing with others creates a forward momentum that drives me to learn. I discover how writing works. I uncover what to teach. I determine how to sustain energy when January’s days begin and end in darkness and the temperature won’t climb above zero. Writers notice more, sing more, laugh more. We live more deeply in community with one another and the student writers in our room. That’s a pretty big paycheck for an hour a week” (*Inside Writing*, 84).

Imagine gathering a few colleagues to sit and look at writing you’re working on. A writer’s group is an opportunity to connect the personal and the professional in your life: It is invaluable.

A WRITING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

In every school I’ve taught in, the curriculum, however well established, has rarely transferred to a similar set of writing expectations from classroom to classroom. One tenth grade can barely resemble another, even when they teach next door. In high school this is magnified by course levels and teacher turnover. Yet when we consider our vision for a student’s complete high school education, similar expectations in similar courses are crucial.

Teachers in my school asked for time to meet and could rarely make it happen; teacher workshop days just don’t occur often enough to allow for in-time collaboration that is essential throughout the year. With the number of new teachers brought into our school over the last decade, we could feel the need for an adjustment. Our car was wobbling on its wheels—time for an alignment check.

Our school has embraced Rick Dufour’s vision of Professional Learning Communities (the PLC model), and we have set these up for each course that is co-taught in our school. All of the algebra teachers, the American literature teachers, and so on meet together; in this writing course we have an hour each Thursday before school starts set aside to work together. We review our expectations, look at student work, discuss what is working in our teaching, and consider what is missing.

The writing teachers first meet in August to consider our goals and determine eight key learning targets (Figure 1) for the course based on The National Council of Teachers

of English (NCTE) guidelines for student writing and the New Hampshire Frameworks from the Department of Education.

Key learning targets:

1. Students will apply a variety of techniques to generate, draft, revise, edit, and publish the following texts:
 - a. Narrative
 - b. Argument
 - c. Commentary
 - d. Multigenre thematic paper (including research)

2. Students will become articulate, well-organized writers who engage in the writing process to improve their work over time using the following strategies:
 - a. Rehearsal for writing—exploring an idea
 - b. Re-“vision” of a piece
 - c. Expansion and compression of ideas
 - d. Use of dialogue, descriptive detail, and voice
 - e. Use of punctuation and grammar to improve readability

3. Students will use questioning, reviewing, and re-reading to monitor comprehension and match reading style and pace to task.
 - a. Students will read at least five books over the course of the semester.
 - b. Students will increase stamina and reading rate.

4. Students will respond to texts in the following ways:
 - a. Journals, quick writes, or other free writing
 - b. Small-group discussions
 - c. Annotation of a text

FIGURE 1

5. Students will use spoken language and listening skills in discussion or presentations to accomplish a variety of tasks, including:
 - a. Discussing content and craft of essays
 - b. Leading others in a discussion of revision strategies used in a draft and lessons learned as a writer
 - c. Responding to questions with appropriate elaboration to clarify, illustrate, or expand as appropriate

6. Students will demonstrate the ability to work through the stages of the research process using information literacy skills to accomplish the following:
 - a. Develop and support an idea that controls your writing
 - b. Document sources using MLA format including parenthetical citations and works cited page
 - c. Use complex structures to organize and analyze information
 - d. Identify propaganda, point of view, and bias, and identify errors in logic

7. Students will improve self-evaluation skills by using the qualities of writing for each genre studied and the six traits of writing to evaluate their writing and that of other writers in order to:
 - a. Clarify understanding of effective writing qualities
 - b. Identify areas of strength and weakness as a writer
 - c. Identify needed revisions

8. Students will complete a final portfolio of writing work that shows:
 - a. Improvement in all traits of writing
 - b. How the writing process improved a piece of writing
 - c. A detailed analysis of their own writing
 - d. A synthesis of understanding through creation of a multigenre thematic piece of writing
 - e. The ability to write an organized, coherent essay on demand

FIGURE 1 *continued*

We used our learning targets to create common assessments of student performance. (These lists of qualities we use to evaluate student writing by genre are on the DVD.) We share our assessment tools and we share student work regularly in our meetings. We talk about individual students and common writing problems, and we look at the results of our work by examining the data for all of the students taking the course. This year the weakest student scores overall were in argument, so we intend to focus on the teaching of that genre in the fall.

It is healthy to examine teaching practices with colleagues and consider what is working. Teaching is such an isolating profession without built-in time to collaborate. As a writing PLC we create a shared portfolio for our principal that documents our thinking and our reflections on what we're doing. What I appreciate about the PLC model is that teachers agree on outcomes, but the path toward those goals can vary by teacher. I know there are a lot of fads that come and go in teaching, but this PLC model has increased my professional time with colleagues: That is a smart change in high school life.

READING, STRUGGLING, AND LEARNING FROM CURRENT JOURNALS AND BOOKS

I've always been a reader. I consume about fifty books a year and probably twenty of them are professional books on teaching and teaching writing. (This means, of course, that I don't do lots of other things: My garden is full of weeds and frazzled in the heat, you can write in the dust on my car dashboard, and I eat many meals from little cardboard containers with plastic silverware.) I'm always reaching for what I don't know and what someone else might be able to articulate for me that will make me a better teacher. This is an important personal investment in my career.

One summer I enrolled in a course at the University of New Hampshire and was asked to keep track of my experience reading the course text in order to write a short essay in response. Mine is shown in Figure 2.

Authentic Aggravation

I read the first hundred pages Tom Romano's *Crafting Authentic Voice* while reclined on the couch in the kitchen. My son twanged the Jimi Hendrix version of "The Star Spangled Banner" on his electric guitar upstairs. I drummed my fingers like a soft thunder across the back of the book and listened to Romano's secrets of writing with power. I was rocking to both beats. My plans for September spun in my mind and the pages raced by.

I rushed to share my thinking with Ed, a colleague most likely to worship at the Altar of Romano. Ed's Mr. Multigenre, my buddy, my writing companion; he gets it. He showed me end-of-the-year student writing from his class and we high-fived. I handed him a copy of *Crafting Authentic Voice*. The next week Ed recommended "The Five Paragraph You-Know-What" to our lit-ra-ture colleagues for summer reading, and we giggled together as we watched them wince. We drive them crazy.

I felt like such a renegade riding bareback into my summer vacation. Yeehaw! But it's those wincing colleagues I'm thinking of this afternoon. I was skewered in the paper today by a local curmudgeon who believes my lack of supervision of English teachers is the reason his stepson can't write well. He's right. Dammit. I have been unable to move *The Cult of the Furrowed Brow* at our high school. For two years I was the English Department Chairman and, based on the results, wholly ineffective. I'm not sure my work makes much of a difference to tell you the truth; I think this town ought to get a refund. There's a fierce and mighty bunch of teachers who still believe high standards means thesis statements and the Canon only. The purpose of writing is to analyze symbolism in yet another classic novel, so too many of our students can't write well about anything, even the most important moments in their lives.

I may be riding my own horse bareback, but it's lonely on the trail.

My seniors wrote bravely and well in my classroom this year. Every single one of them. They crafted writing. I thought if I taught writing well in my room it would somehow inspire the others, but it did not. Too many English teachers are not teaching writing; they're assigning and assessing it. I thought I could move them. I can't. I think it's time to accept my failure and giddyap on outta here.

Crafting an authentic anything means caring enough about a piece to keep revising it late into the night. We don't craft meaningless reviews of books; we first-draft 'em, only draft 'em, quickly toss 'em. It is true of you and me; it is true of teenagers. But nobody's listening at my school. When I show my students what I'm up to in my writing, they start galloping on their own. Fast. But I only

FIGURE 2

model writing I care about and my students know the difference. We all write in my room; we ride together. This is quite a contrast to the poetry packet my son completed for his sophomore honors class: one tight template after another, my son absent in each. Cam needs to find his voice as a writer, but his teacher kept a bit in his mouth to direct him precisely where to go. He writes no better than he did last September.

Once by a campfire I watched my friend's daughter make daisy chains with my toddler. Anna was the most beautiful teenager I'd ever known, kind and smart and deeply spiritual. When a drunk driver crushed the car she was riding in and took her life, I couldn't breathe. Writing led me home. I struggle to show that kind of writing in my room; stories that matter, words that teach. But I can't do it alone in one eighteen-week semester. I need my posse of colleagues to circle in and help me create writers. How do I guide them off the plodding trail and into the open range?

FIGURE 2 continued

Keeping current by reading the collected understandings from colleagues near and far places pressure on my own thinking. I like that pressure. Carol Jago's *Cohesive Writing* kept our department focused and talking one year, but Murray's *Write to Learn* just caused a lot arguing. In the two years I worked as a department chair, I felt more failure than success. I don't think it was the right fit for me. But I do know that reading with colleagues and talking through our understandings is an inexpensive way to mimic a college course. We read a chapter a month and arrive with notes and questions. It might be you can gather only a few colleagues in this kind of study group, but it is a smart way to nurture your own passion for this work.

EXPERIMENTS WITH CURRENT TECHNOLOGY

We have such opportunities for writing in the world: Students are writing blogs, composing animated movies, emailing and instant messaging with wildness and grace. When a much-loved social studies teacher from our school died a year ago, within hours students began posting to a Myspace page created in his honor. It's a different world out there.

I bought a Tablet PC three years ago to experiment with revision on student work in front of the class. Students have used it to create storyboards for their peers or to talk through their moves as a writer. Yes, it can happen on an overhead, but the Tablet preserves the writing and the handwritten changes together in an easily printable and accessible form. It is a marvelous teaching tool.

This year I created a blog for my class. It was a new venture; I had no confidence in what to post. I tried to connect students to each other and the thinking of writers. There is work to do there and I look forward to what this year's students can teach me about that genre.

By far my most exciting technology adventure is still on this home computer. In a class with Tom Newkirk one summer, he showed "Craziest" by Liz Dubelman. You can find this by googling her name. Sit back and watch great writing go further with images: Video literature has the potential to entice even our most reluctant writers into composition. I met Lisa Miller at the University of New Hampshire one afternoon to learn more, and I hope to take her class in the summer some year. I've started pasting together images to accompany one of my favorite pieces of writing from *The Greatest Catch*. It takes hours, but it is fascinating work. We created an animation course and had dozens of students sign up. Yes, we have to beg and plead for the technology to support it, but new genres that combine image, art, and writing will certainly become more prevalent in the world. I want to be ready for that world. If you're curious you might visit the University of California at Chico and talk to my brother-in-law Peter Kittle. (Or catch his experiments on Youtube.com.) He runs a technology conference for the Northern California Writing Project that will give you the tools you need for your own journey.

CONFERENCES AND WORKSHOPS

I attend as many as I can. My school district budgets fifty dollars a year toward this for individual teachers, so I pay for the bulk of it, but it is worth it. I leave energized.

I attended Writer's Day in 2006 at the New Hampshire Writers' Project of Southern New Hampshire University. In the afternoon I went to Don Murray's workshop on writing memoir. Truthfully, I drove two hours and spent \$140 just for that hour and fifteen minutes. There were other benefits to the day, but watching Don write was worth the whole Saturday.

Don began by saying he was going to write a column cold for us. He was going to talk aloud and write and show us what it looks like for him to compose his weekly

column for the *Boston Globe*. It's funny that he volunteered this demonstration just days after I read one of his articles from the '70s when he wrote that teachers should model drafting in front of students. I was thinking how I believed it made sense and was living it in my classroom, but I'd never seen anyone else do it, except for the workshops I've presented with Don Graves. And there he was.

He started with a few fragments in a list. And on the fourth one he said, "There's my column." He just knew the minute he wrote the phrase. After that he zeroed in on one moment that illustrated that idea. It was fleshed out in a few sentences and then a few more random thoughts and slowly this theme began to emerge. Don was talking as he wrote and even just saying the words out loud as he typed, sometimes saying more than he wrote, but talking the idea into form. After fifteen minutes of writing and talking he had his column—the skeleton of his column, anyway. He took questions for a while and then was asked to model more writing. In the next ten minutes he came up with a connection between his wife's absence and reading his house in a new way due to the silence.

This is what I knew after watching him compose: I could write that. I could do what he did. I could turn off the censor, just let the ideas come, and talk something into a form. Now, I know the real hard work is in the rewriting and crafting of that central idea, but once the idea begins to gather speed like it did in his demonstration, you want to work with it. That's how it has happened for me. There's energy in revision; the block is getting started.

Now carry this forward into a classroom. The teacher shows the composition process—nothing held back, just writing and talking and thinking and shaping something into an idea. The students think, "I could do that." What a way to start the workshop. When I teach a genre and jump in like that, exposing the flaws and the thinking and how what I want the piece to be is short of what is in my draft, they all engage in trying to shape that piece. In one class last year Ryan drew me a sketch of the setting as he saw it, trying to understand it, but also trying to help me see what I still needed to write. Kevin stood back and offered the suggestion that helped me reorganize the scene. Andy suggested I try the exercise we had tried in our notebooks earlier in the week. I did and it worked. All of the collective thinking and talking was energizing. I wanted to keep working on the piece and my students got right to work on their own.

Now try on a different suit: Sit before the blank screen. I've done it several times. I have nothing, and just sitting won't help. I really can't work from nothing. I need to read other stuff I've been writing to get my mind engaged or look at work on the computer that I've started and not finished, or just thumb through my notebook. Don Murray started listing. By the fourth idea, he had something. When I have a student sitting in my

class before a blank screen, I stop by for a conference to get him talking about his thinking. I make a list of what he talks about. By about the tenth idea, he started expanding on it and soon he didn't need me anymore.

Conferences and workshops like Don's help me escape the relentless pace of the classroom and sit and think for a day. I try to attend at least one a year. And if I have to choose just one, I'll sacrifice everything to go the NCTE national conference. One afternoon as I sat on a long flight with my notebook, I wrote my memories of Pittsburg 2005. Here's why I go.

THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE

A CRAZY CLOWN MAN, AND THE STAYING POWER OF PERFECT FETTUCCINE

It was late for dinner, but the fettuccine was faultless—every bite a luscious blend of butter, cream, and parmesan I'd have to admit was even better than the dish I make at home. It was already 10:00 and I never ate this late. I considered all of that fat going to my thighs as I wound each flat noodle against my fork. Alan was there and Dawn and Karen and Stevie. I was blessed to be dining with the Denver folks—those smart literacy leaders I had listened to and read about. Colorado seems to be filled with smart teachers.

We sat at our round table reliving moments from the day: listening to Frank McCourt read from *Teacher Man* and one workshop after another, Katie Wood Ray and Kyleene Beers and Donald Graves. We laughed and drank rich wine I could feel coloring my cheeks. Soon we noticed how empty the restaurant had become and remembered our early meetings and just how far we were from downtown Pittsburgh.

We asked the owner to call a cab. He'd sat nearby all evening but the only glancing attention we'd paid him was a whispered comparison to the giant painting of a clown hanging on one wall behind us, and of course, to compliment him on the food. He was dark-haired with a loud Italian accent and the gritty struggle of a small business owner painted across his eyes. His belly rose like a hot air balloon beneath his sweater as he called one company and then another. It would be ninety minutes before we'd see a cab.

Now I felt *tired*. Why hadn't we walked to a place near our hotels? I could feel crankiness rising; I wasn't getting what I wanted right this minute. Sometimes I think teaching high school has trapped me into acting like them, talking like them, thinking like them.

Alan had a red pick-up truck and offered to toss us in the back for an illegal, freezing ride back to the center of the city—or we could wait. I hate the cold, but I was considering it when our clown host volunteered to drive. Imagine: There are still people that generous in the world. We objected, but were soon piling into his tank of a car—a Thunderbird perhaps? A Lincoln? Something wide with plush interior and those quilted velvet pockets on the back of each seat.

His large hands slid across the steering wheel as he maneuvered through the dark streets, asking about the conference (all those English teachers in one city!) and the work we did. What about those kids today? He wondered about our country's battered public schools, so real in his decaying neighborhood in Pittsburgh. I watched the lights of the city approach and smiled as we pulled near the Denver crew's hotel.

It was only as I met Karen's eyes for an instant as she nudged the door shut that I realized I'd be alone for the last six blocks of our ride. She was anxious and suddenly, so was I. Just me and the crazy clown man near midnight in an unfamiliar city. I never wanted to be a Stephen King novel. Were there handles on the doors in the backseat? Had he heard our whispered laughter? It was a long crawl through traffic and my frantic imagination. I missed my husband, worried about my children being raised without a mother, crossed and recrossed my legs to disturb the silence that crowded the car.

As he swung the car near the doormen at my hotel he thanked me for the business. I was chagrined, still trembling and feeling ridiculous as I stepped into the lobby, my phone buzzing in my pocket as Karen called to check on my arrival. There was Jim Burke chatting with tall, serious looking men in a close huddle then bursting into laughter. I checked my watch—past 12—a time I hadn't seen in months.

This year I'll add a long weekend in New York to my memories of the NCTE national conference. It's a stretch to pay for every year since my district won't, but attending is a commitment to my own professional development that feels essential. I lean toward the light of educators I admire and feel my dry roots soak in the nourishment. The NCTE conference is an assembly of bright minds who share what they know and encourage deep thinking; it feeds me well for the rest of the year, like fettuccine on a cold, November night.

FINAL THOUGHTS

We are a proud profession. We are educated, passionate, and determined. We need to reach and grow and challenge each other. I recommend the National Writing Project and the University of New Hampshire Summer Literacy Program as wonderful places to nurture your own love for this work. Don't suffer in silent isolation; find colleagues who marvel at this work, attend the NCTE national conference, and gather teachers near you to experiment with writing. We are in this together; let's make the most of our days in this work.