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Creating a Community of Learners Among High School Teachers

By Sam Wineburg and
Pam Grossman

The notion that someone can teach for nine months and then start to learn for two weeks in the summer is fatally flawed. We must find ways to break down the false barriers between teaching and learning. Mr. Wineburg and Ms. Grossman describe one way of doing so.

K AREN is a 28-year-old English teacher in her second year of teaching. She has come together with 15 other teachers in her Seattle high school to read and discuss *The Sweeter the Juice*, by Shirley Haizlip, the story of a woman struggling with her racial identity. Karen's words provide a sobering introduction to the landscape of teaching:

> I had a feeling of frustration as I was reading it and thinking, "Well, how is this going to fit into my curriculum?" But as I was thinking about it, I realized that I had forgotten how to read for pleasure. We live by the bell, 15 minutes to do this, a half-hour to do that. I don't have time to do this pleasure reading thing!

Karen's frustration speaks to two trou-

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bling aspects of school life. First, the bell sets the hurried rhythm of the school day. Second, this day contains no time for continued study in one's discipline. Two short years into teaching, Karen has come to regard reading that is not tied directly to her teaching as a frill: that "pleasure reading thing." The inseparability of teaching and learning, the notion that one atrophies without the other, is not part of Karen's — or of most teachers' — induction into teaching.

Our project set out to do something about this situation. Funded by a grant from the James S. McDonnell Foundation of St. Louis, our goal is nothing short of changing the intellectual environment in which teachers work. In contrast to the quick-fix culture of staff development, our project tries to create an ongoing venue for teachers' learning — not an isolated feature during a summer institute or a one-shot workshop whose only trace is a shiny binder. At the heart of our work is this simple but indisputable principle: schools cannot become exciting places for children until they first become exciting places for adults.

The Grammar of Staff Development

Teachers in our project come together monthly for an entire day to read and discuss literary and historical works and to plan an interdisciplinary humanities curriculum. Substitutes are provided on those

Illustration by Kay Salem

days so that teachers can focus on their own reading and reflection. The monthly meetings are supplemented by after-school meetings every other week and by a five-day retreat in the summer.

Our project stands in contrast to the two main approaches to staff development for high school teachers. The most common form of staff development — the district-mandated inservice training day — provides teachers with new information to keep them up-to-date. However, any presentation that speaks equally to the diverse interests of the calculus teacher and the gym teacher, the French teacher and the physics teacher, will almost certainly be unable to do more than tinker at the margins of teaching. Generic workshops are easy to dismiss because many teachers believe — rightly or wrongly — that the strategies covered do not apply to *their* subject matter. Moreover, the outcomes of these workshops are usually so short-lived that they rarely make a difference. Yet a recent study in four East Coast districts found that isolated activities with little follow-up still dominated the staff development landscape. One teacher characterized inservice training days as "an appendix" — something she could "take or leave without being affected one way or the other."[1]
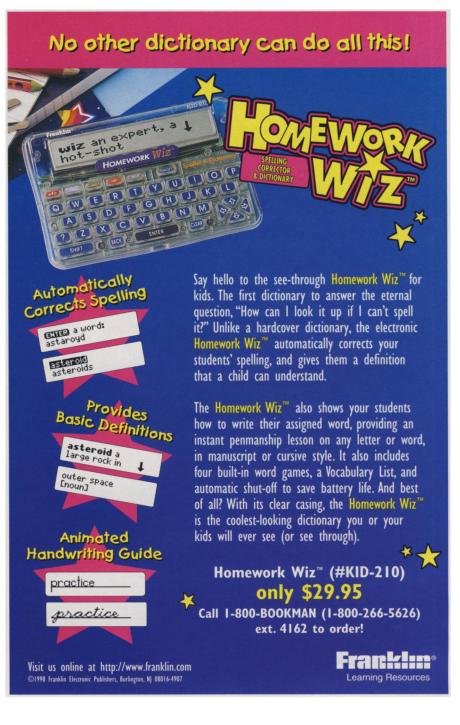
The second main approach to staff development is modeled after the summer institutes sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Individual teachers travel to college campuses to undertake intensive study of new developments in historiography or the latest approaches to the teaching of Shakespeare. Done well, such experiences energize teachers and send them back to the classroom with fresh ideas. But this approach also rests on the questionable assumption that "changed" individuals can return to unchanged settings and resist the forces that work to pull them back to the status quo.

Our project differs from both approaches. First, we are in it for the long haul — three years, not three days. We know that schools are places bound by tradition and that real change takes time. Second, we recognize that approaches aimed at individual teachers ignore the social realities of large high schools, in which individuals are organized into subject-matter units. For this reason, we based the creation of our community of learners on the high school department.

For better or worse, departments are part of the grammar of high school. Even in a school set up to be "department-free," departments find ways to spontaneously regenerate, like the arms of a starfish.[2] Departments are more than organizational structures — they have their own unique group psychology. Recent work by one of us has shown that, in their views about the goals of schooling, tracking, and the organization of the curriculum, social studies teachers from different states have more in common with one another than they have in common with colleagues from the math department in the same school.[3]

Departments constitute a strategic midpoint between whole-school change and individual transformation; department-based professional development can take advantage of shared interest in a common subject matter and create a local community to support teachers' growth. Further, in order to change students' experience of literature or history as they move through the curriculum, we need to focus on chang-

ing the vision of the department rather than the vision of one or two individuals.

Departments provide opportunities for the activation of "distributed cognition" — a chance for individuals to break out of their classrooms and come together over common issues of subject matter and student learning. Under the best circumstances, individual thinking can be expanded upon or challenged by peers who share a commitment to the goals of the subject. But departments can constrain cognition as well as amplify it. While some departments offer opportunities to examine thinking, others stifle it — enforcing a single view and censoring those who don't toe the line. For these reasons we brought together two different but related departments. English and history teachers share a commitment to creating a literate citizenry, but each department views the goals of reading, the nature of student learning, and the constraints of curriculum in very different ways.

Creating Curriculum
And Reading Books

The teachers in our project come together over a practical goal: the creation of an interdisciplinary curriculum that draws on both language arts and history/social studies. By itself, this goal is not new. What *is* new is the context in which this enterprise is taken up.

Some teachers in our project have experienced a model of curriculum development in which they study new material in the summer and quickly write lesson plans for the fall. We elected to take a different route. Before we could discuss the substance of the curriculum, we first had to get to know one another as fellow learners. To do this, we borrowed the model of book clubs that meet in people's homes and imported it into an urban high school. As a group we selected pieces of fiction and history — often related to teachers' interests in curriculum development — and used these works to create a sense of shared intellectual community. We thus laid a foundation of common understanding on which to build the work of curriculum development.

It is not always smooth going when committed English and history teachers, joined by representatives from special education and English as a second language, come together and discuss books like Na-

than McCall's *Makes You Want to Holler*, Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, or Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*. Daylong meetings and after-school follow-ups allowed our group to go beyond "polite disagreement" so that genuine differences could emerge. Such differences, which rarely come to the surface in short-term projects, need to be part of the discussion. Otherwise, unrecognized and unspoken assumptions become stumbling blocks that thwart shared understanding.

For example, in an early meeting, teachers debated the value of using the film *Disclosure* as prelude to having students read a Supreme Court case on sexual harassment. The teachers disagreed vehemently about the value of this approach. Initially, they interpreted the disagreement as an instance of interpersonal conflict. But after many similar disagreements, we came to understand the discussion as emblematic of dramatic differences in teachers' beliefs about how to read texts, about how students make meaning from texts, and about how and when to draw on young people's personal experience in teaching the humanities.

Put differently, before we could have serious discussions about curriculum integration, we, as a community of readers, had to experience the give-and-take of discussing important books. Do we trust the voice of the narrator when he is a white man speaking as a Vietnamese woman in Robert Olin Butler's *Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*? How can we judge the claim that Nazis administering "head shots" to innocent women and children on the Polish front were not barbarians, but rather "ordinary men," caught up in circumstances beyond their control in Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*? What can we learn about our own experiences with racism by examining the experiences of people from another continent in Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart*?

By reflecting on our own sometimes heated, sometimes hilarious, discussions, we forged a list of "guiding questions" that captured what *we* did as readers from two different disciplines. To what do we pay attention? What do we ignore? How does the past influence the present? Only after addressing such questions could we move to the next stage: planning the kinds of intellectual experiences we wanted for our students.

Making Teaching Public

The books we have read are not the only texts examined in our group meetings. Inspired by the work of John Fredriksen and his colleagues on teachers' discussions of videotapes of their own classrooms, we have integrated "video-texts" into our all-day meetings.[4] We began by examining a classroom discussion on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, led by Fred Hamel, our research assistant, an English teacher on leave from a neighboring district. In subsequent meetings, teachers showed portions of videos from their own classrooms.

While videotapes are features in the professional socialization of social workers, surgeons, professional athletes, and broadcast journalists, they are not part of the culture of preparing teachers. No matter how safe the atmosphere, the act of putting a camera in a classroom raises the specter of evaluation. Moreover, the sheer novelty of watching oneself on tape can be unsettling. But we see videos as a key to overcoming the culture of privatism that pervades schools. Some teachers in our group had worked side-by-side for 20 years and had never seen one another teach until our first video club. Video clubs offer the potential of opening up the act of teaching to question, comment, and elaboration by a group of supportive peers.

A Painfully Necessary Process

As we look toward the second half of our project, we are well aware of the challenges before us. Releasing teachers from the classroom once a month creates bureaucratic hassles, scheduling snafus, and grading crunches when meetings fall at the end of the semester. After-school meetings conflict with cheerleading practice, soccer games, or simply getting home to make dinner. Some meetings sizzle with new ideas and stimulating conversation. Others sputter toward a conclusion. Our attempt to study this process has taught us an important lesson: real progress does not come neatly packaged for display in bar charts and growth lines. We have learned that progress is more akin to making meaning from a Faulkner novel, a process filled with switchbacks and blind curves, ultimately satisfying but long in coming. In an enterprise as rich and as important as the humanities, we see no other way.

The project also requires that the group

learn to confront the conflicts that inevitably arise as the community emerges. People must interact directly with colleagues they may previously have chosen to avoid. They must confront the different perspectives about subject matter and teaching that dwell in the same hallway. The process is not easy or comfortable, but, as one teacher put it, it is "painfully necessary."

Amidst these challenges there are many signs that make us optimistic. During one meeting, we engaged in a deep and enthusiastic discussion of Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. We confronted our collective ignorance of Hinduism, and we struggled over the question of why, with all its problems, the United States still attracts immigrants from the world over. At the end of the discussion, one teacher asked wistfully, "How can I create discussions like these in my own classroom?" Our own personal experiences as a community of readers helped provide an image of what might be possible in the classroom.

Our discussions often spill over into the ensuing week. After watching the videotaped discussion of *Huck Finn*, we debated the very question of continuing to use that work in the classroom. We filled one another's mailboxes with op-ed pieces and magazine articles, and echoes of the debate could be heard in the faculty lunchroom.

We also did not anticipate some of the effects our project has had on students, who see their teachers leave the classroom once a month to model what it means to be lifelong learners. Students spy copies of the project books on their teachers' desks and then hear different versions — sometimes opposing versions — of these books from different teachers. More than once our books have ended up as the subject of student book reports or even as part of the regular curriculum. When an English teacher reminded students that they were to provide a "critical evaluation," not a piece of fan mail, for their book reports, one student teased her, "Just like you Ms. T, with your books for the McDonnell Project!"

The Nexus of Teaching And Learning

The notion that someone can teach for nine months and then start to learn for two weeks in the summer is fatally flawed, somewhat akin to having a marathoner train all week long but eat only on week-

T. J. THOMAS
PRINCIPAL
(WHO ALWAYS HAS THE HOME COURT ADVANTAGE)

ends. We must find ways to break down the false barriers between teaching and learning. In other languages the connection between the two is preserved. In Hebrew, for example, the word for teaching is derived from the root of the verb "to learn," leading to the interpretation of teacher as "expert learner." Indeed, it is precisely this insight that came to Karen, the young English teacher whose words framed the beginning of this article. Recall that Karen had come to regard the act of reading as that "pleasure reading thing," something extraneous to her life as an English teacher. But the second half of Karen's comment provides a different view:

What I'm realizing is that I need to build this reading into my life. *The Sweeter the Juice* was a great start because I started thinking about things I haven't thought about in a long time. And I realized, "You know what — you need to read just to read. You tell your kids to do that, and you're not even doing it yourself!

We are often asked if our project is fea-

sible in other schools and districts. To be sure, some of our activities have been supported by grant money. However, many districts already devote six or seven days a year to staff development, each day unrelated to the others. In many places, the resources exist right now. What is lacking is the courage to allow teachers the time and the space to come together to read good books in a community of their peers. It is, at once, a simple yet radical idea.

1. Barbara Miller and Brian Lord, *Staff Development in Four Districts* (Newton, Mass.: Educational Development Center, 1995), p. 143.

2. Joan E. Talbert and Milbrey W. McLaughlin, "Understanding Teaching in Context," in David K. Cohen, Milbrey W. McLaughlin, and Joan E. Talbert, eds., *Teaching for Understanding: Challenges for Policy and Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), pp. 167-206.

3. Pamela L. Grossman and Susan S. Stodolsky, "Content as Context: The Role of School Subjects in Secondary School Teaching," *Educational Researcher*, November 1995, pp. 5-11.

4. See the report by John Frederiksen et al., "Video Portfolio Assessment," paper prepared by the Educational Testing Service for the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, Berkeley, Calif., 1992. **K**