

Introduction: Revisiting a Community of Practice in Action

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This book tells the story of how educators from a range of instructional settings—elementary school, middle school, high school, and college—formed an intentional community of practice focused on enhancing teaching and learning. Meeting, writing, and reflecting together, participants used sustained, shared inquiry to study their individual questions about teaching, while at the same time they also examined the specific learning practices being employed by several small writing groups and the larger team. On one level, then, our story demonstrates the potential that teachers’ writing groups have to provide a mechanism for individuals’ professional growth, a growth that includes the ability to make knowledge about teaching. On a second level, we also document in this volume how affiliating with a larger community of practice emphasizing collaborative reflection supported the groups’ work. The goal behind telling this story is two-fold: (1) to provide specific examples of teacher knowledge created and refined in a “safe” collaborative inquiry space, itself composed through layered communities of practice hosting this project’s work; and (2) to make visible the ways in which writing groups can facilitate teacher professionalization through reflective engagement and writing.

Our work together builds upon others’ examination of social processes educators use for knowledge making, such as studies of how teachers use informal anecdotes (sometimes called “classroom lore”) to generate shared understanding of their practices.¹ But our work has extended such earlier research by emphasizing, providing opportunities for, and studying processes of shared, structured reflection as avenues to teacher knowledge and professionalization. Perhaps most important, and notably different from projects on teacher study groups that have focused only on professional reading, writing was the central component of our learning. Though meeting independently for many sessions, our writing groups clearly benefited from being connected to the larger inquiry community assembled for this project. Indeed, our experience has shown that teachers who form small writing groups can profit from linking their work to larger support systems, such as school-improvement organizations or professional organizations like a National Writing Project site. By positioning their small-group learning

within a support network, our project participants could study their own teaching in relational terms, building on scholarship and teaching practices beyond that most immediately available in their writing group. Interactions between the small writing groups and the larger project community promoted the development of a shared vocabulary as well, one whose major recurring terms we list below, with explanations to guide our readers now:

- inquiry: the process of studying open-ended questions, in this case through collaborative work of individuals and writing groups linked to our project;
- inquiry community: the entire group of teachers affiliated with the project, including the members of all the original writing groups and one group of readers who provided feedback to an early draft of the manuscript;
- protocols: regularized rules of behavior tried out and then self-consciously adapted within the writing groups, with different groups developing different protocols; parallel practices developed in the larger inquiry community;
- reflection: individual or group analysis based on retrospective thinking about a learning experience in action (see Schön below); may be carried out privately but more likely to be expressed orally or in writing within a collaborative context;
- professionalization: developing an enhanced identity as a teacher, based on acquisition of new knowledge and skills and the ability to share those with others;
- community of practice: a professionalized learning group using social strategies for acculturation and knowledge building, as in the research we outline below.

Our inquiry project situated itself from the outset within a broad tradition of scholarship on reflective practice as central to professional development and also within an emerging body of research on the special value that organized communities of practice can bring to such efforts. Crucial to this tradition has been the work of Donald Schön, whose influential books cut across a range of professional settings. When Schön began to publish on reflective practice, as in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), he did not focus on classroom teachers, but rather on such figures as physicians, architects, and engineers—all of whom, he recommended, would benefit from studying the ways in which apprenticeship models of learning are used in fields such as athletics, the arts, and craft groups. From Schön's initial work, models emerged for

professional training that emphasized knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action. Significantly, in 1987, Schön himself delivered an address to the American Educational Research Association conference in Washington, D.C.—a talk whose title echoed that of his second major book, published that year, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. Schön’s talk explicitly identified the field of education as a site where his program for reflection-centered learning could be applied, and he proposed “reflection-ON-reflection-in-action” as an important skill for teachers to develop—one requiring “verbalization and symbolization.” Schön’s 1987 talk is especially significant to our project for two reasons. First, the occasion of working together enabled teachers to articulate their reflections and other changes for shared “reflection-ON-reflection in action” in both oral and written texts. Second, these opportunities provided teachers with access to “symbolization” of teaching principles in their making of essays for other teacher readers.

Meanwhile, as teacher educators were paying increasing attention to Schön’s model, both applications of his ideas and new compatible frameworks were being explored in a range of other professional contexts. Key leaders in organizational theory, such as Peter Senge, and scholars studying social learning, such as anthropologist Jean Lave and learning theorist Etienne Wenger, gradually built a body of knowledge leading to the concept of “communities of practice.” As this research has noted, many communities of practice are informal learning groups, like the office- machine repair technicians described by Barry Sugarman—workers who might seem to be doing their jobs independently but who, in supportive organizational environments, might actually be sharing stories of their methods and experiences in unstructured yet highly productive ways—not unlike the teachers who talk in Patricia Lambert Stock’s “The Function of Teacher Anecdote.” As Mark Smith’s recent overview of communities of practice has pointed out, these fluid, informal social learning units are actually all around us, and many people participate in several of them at any given time. And as Lave and Wenger have illustrated in studies of apprenticeships operating within communities of practice (e.g., servicemen, midwives, meat-cutters), new members of such groups can be gradually acculturated to enable their participation; doing so reshapes their identities, as well as provides access to shared skills.²

But communities of practice can also be organized more formally to support the learning processes associated with their goals. Interestingly, some formal educational institutions have resisted this possibility—either overtly through compartmentalized designs for teaching and learning or, indirectly, by failing to support informal communities of practice seeking to organize. However, a few professions have gone beyond simply allowing communities

of practice to flourish to directly promoting careful analysis of how such work can support professionalization. At the fore of research on how such communities of practice (can) function through formal, structured learning has been the medical profession.

Atul Gawande's *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science* exemplifies well how formal communities of practice work. In *Complications*, Atul Gawande, a seventh-year surgical resident, describes, dramatizes, and explicates the culture of medicine, particularly the community of practice inhabited by surgeons. Among the most interesting reflections informing the book is a consideration of how surgeons know what they know. Most of us perceive medicine as science, a discipline whose epistemology is located in control groups, protocols, treatment variables, and chi squares calculating significant differences. Gawande, however, complicates such a view. In addition to relying on quantifiable information, medicine, he says, relies on the human story: "In the end it is sometimes not science but what people tell us that is the most convincing proof we have" (207).

Although Gawande uses neither the word *reflection* nor the phrase *community of practice*, what he portrays is his own socialization into a community of surgeons who rely on reflection to inform and interrogate practice and to make knowledge, especially in the M & M, the weekly Morbidity and Mortality conference, held precisely so that surgeons can gather to review practice and to focus on errors in practice in order to understand their causes and in order to reduce the likelihood of their repeating. The protocol for the M & M never varies. The physician in charge speaks for the entire team, even if she or he wasn't present at the event under inquiry. In other words, a resident might have handled the case, but the person responsible (called, often ironically, the attending physician) speaks. First presented is information about the case: age of patient, reason for surgery, progress of surgery. Next the surgeon outlines what happened, focusing on the error in question. That there was an error is not in question, so the point is to see if that error might have been discerned more readily and thus to have produced a positive outcome. The surgeon provides an analysis and responds to questions; the surgeon continues to act as spokesperson for the entire medical team. The physician members of the team, regardless of rank, are included but do not speak; the other members of the medical team, including nurses and technicians, are excluded, as are patients. The presentation concludes with a directive about how such prototypic cases should be handled in the future.

Several assumptions relevant to our project undergird this community of practice. For one, while error is not considered acceptable, it is considered *normal*; accordingly, physicians aren't interested in linking the particular

doctor to the error, but rather *the error to the practice*. This discourse, then, is optimistic, predicated on the idea that through the discourse, change and knowledge can be made. This emphasis on practice rather than agent is likewise reflected in the form the discourse takes. According to Gawande, “A successful M & M presentation inevitably involves a certain elision of detail and a lot of passive verbs. No one screws up a cricothyroidotomy. Instead, ‘a cricothyroidotomy was attempted without success’” (59). Not least, the discourse also encourages the physician to inhabit an interesting intersection between self-doubt and blame. Temporarily, blame is acceptable, but once established, the physician has to shake it off. Self-doubt is continuous, but can’t be allowed to be debilitating. According to Gawande, a surgeon who doesn’t bring self-doubt and humility to the operating table—much, we might think, like a teacher bringing the same attitudes to the classroom—is losing the essence of being a surgeon.

In a number of ways, Gawande’s account of professionalization within the medical profession has parallels with recent research on school environments that effectively promote teachers’ professional growth. For example, in “The Insiders: Development in School with Colleagues Can Succeed,” Margaret A. Johnson and Gregory A. Johnson describe characteristics of school settings that foster teachers’ ability to manage their own professionalization by providing opportunities to talk together in an unfettered atmosphere, but at a regularly scheduled time using an agreed-upon framework somewhat similar to the Morbidity and Mortality conference shown by Gawande. Similarly, Ann Lieberman has echoed Gawande’s account by offering a portrait of a successful elementary school where teachers managed their own professional development in “a true learning community” sponsoring organized discussions of practice in action (Sparks 53). Lieberman’s and Diane Wood’s *Inside the National Writing Project* points to similar effective processes of professionalization in the NWP.

In the model for teacher professionalization we offer here—one grounded in the social work of teachers’ writing groups that are themselves nested inside a larger professional community—we find another related movement in the medical profession’s use of “narrative medicine,” a strategy encouraging physicians to write stories from their own practice. In “Sharing Stories: Narrative Medicine in an Evidence-Based World,” David Hatem and Elizabeth Rider urge other medical professionals to join the “reflective practice” movement by writing stories grounded in reflection as well as observation, using social approaches to knowledge-building that simultaneously encourage “empathy, [additional] reflection, professionalism, and trust,” all of which they associate with “narrative competence” (252).

Set in the context of professional development through reflection-oriented communities of practice, this book provides examples of teachers achieving enhanced professionalization by participating in small writing groups that were nested within a larger community of practice. Significantly different, however, from the learning of physicians participating in the M & M conferences in Gawande's account, the central feature of learning by members of this community of practice was *writing*—writing with an emphasis on *reflection*.

Given the multilayered dimensions through which our authors did their work, several productive approaches for reading this book are possible, including beginning with the essays themselves, each of which addresses questions particularly germane to a distinctive institutional context (e.g., a specific classroom or specific school, a professional development setting such as a National Writing Project site, or a graduate program). Taken individually, each of these core essays presents one teacher's knowledge-making, made possible through a collaborative analysis of experience. Thus, the essays themselves are artifacts of learning that speak to the social processes behind their composition. In addition, to illuminate the ways in which each teacher's contribution emerged from social interchange, each author, after the essay, describes how the particular writing group influenced both text and composing processes behind it. The authors also reflect on additional, transportable knowledge (often about writing itself or about teaching) which they acquired through the group's shared reflections.

To help other groups of teachers adapt our framework for collaborative professional development to their own situational contexts, we also highlight key approaches we used to manage our various writing groups. To underscore connections linking a specific group's work together, we have organized the essays in clusters, and we have included an introductory narrative at the beginning of each of these sections, with a brief history of that writing group's experience *as a group*. These prefatory pieces recount how each writing group developed protocols that simultaneously built community, shaped the essays, and fostered professionalization of group members. While the descriptions clarify how every group developed its own unique approaches for meeting, exchanging feedback between meetings, and moving toward their final products, the introductory narratives also indicate that all groups had in a common a belief system valuing collaboration, reflection, and writing as avenues to learning. Overall, readers will see connections between those community-wide shared beliefs and the particular practices groups implemented, even though there were notable differences in specific management strategies. Therefore, on a pragmatic level, by examining the commonalities and distinctions in the ways the various writing groups worked, readers will be able

to identify strategies that can be used to manage their own writing groups. But readers will also come to understand that, rather than recommending a straightforward formula or set rules for action, we have identified several core principles for writing groups' successful collaboration—principles that can be enacted through a variety of specific techniques. On another level, in tracking the history of each writing group as it worked to become a unit, readers will also see notable traces of the larger inquiry community's approaches for teacher professionalization: creating and sustaining time for collaborative reflection, a major focus for Group One; connecting reflectively to others' knowledge to understand personal experience in the classroom better, a key aim for Group Two; and using social interaction to build trust and refine thinking, a central process for Group Three.

With this context in mind, readers eager to consider writing groups as an avenue for collaborative learning and readers who want to study how these particular writing groups functioned as sites of teachers' professional growth may want to move from this introduction to a close reading of the introductory pieces at the beginning of each group's section. When such a reader does shift to the essays themselves, connections between each group's collaborative approaches, as described in their section introduction, and the content of the essays will underscore how participating in the writing group shaped the teacher-author's thinking and learning. Along those lines, when read in the light of its retrospective introduction, the essays in Part One, as a unit, show how shared reflection in a writing group can lead us to better understand our evolving professional identities. Furthermore, by framing their stories in carefully tentative, still-open terms, this group's essays highlight a theme at the heart of their work—seeing their writing as a beginning point, parallel to the excitement of their shared early brainstorming. Along similar lines, the introduction to Part Two will help readers recognize those essays' common emphasis on learning by gathering resources from beyond the classroom, then situating that knowledge in a context open to shared reflections *with students*. In their emphasis on the classroom itself as a space where new experiments represent a desirable approach to teaching, these essays also celebrate a component of social knowledge-making that was crucial both to these authors' particular writings and to the entire inquiry community's agenda. This stance sees instruction and reflection as inextricably connected and instruction as inherently collaborative, making teachers and their students partners as learners, much as writers and their peer readers became partners generating texts in writing groups. Finally, in Group Three's essays, readers will recognize a shared theme of revision, consistent not only with the authors' topics on revising writing programs, but also with the stage where their texts

seemed to be when our inquiry project began. Though further along initially in the crafting of their essays than the other two groups, because of having already drafted in previous writing group experiences, these authors all found there was still much knowledge to explore through careful revision of their work in response to new readers' input. Self-consciously linking writers to social revision, this group reported in one status-check reflection that "writing is never really finished." Just as we learn to seek continued growth in our professional selves, whatever our working situation, so this group learned that writing products, however thoughtfully prepared, still invite re-vision of text, revision of professional self.

With these cross-group distinctions in mind, readers who are looking for *models of reflective writing about teaching* may find the core essays themselves the most valuable dimension of our book. These essays include:

Essays by Writing Group One: Creating Our Professional Identities

Each essay in this section tells a story of reflection influencing everyday decision-making by teachers and, in the process, shaping our professional selves.

Deborah Kramb's essay, "The Balancing Act: A Play on Managing Our Lives," grew out of a desire to organize challenges she faced as a veteran educator striving to improve her teaching through graduate education and National Board Certification. Kramb found that juggling her multiple commitments, in the short run, distracted her from day-to-day teaching. However, in reflecting on her experiences while writing her essay with support from her group, Kramb came to a deeper appreciation of long-term professional growth.

Carol Harrell, author of "Writing Monster/Writing Mentor," sees her undergraduate course in composition pedagogy as a forum for the exchange of ideas between instructor and preservice teachers. Reviewing student writing created for the course, Harrell explains how studying her students' texts enriched her view of teachers as mentors—both in her own classroom and in the classrooms her preservice teachers will eventually lead.

In "Build It and They Will Learn: Portfolios Revisited," George Seaman discusses how he introduced student portfolios to his classroom. The essay focuses on three key characteristics Seaman found to be essential for creating an environment where student portfolios can thrive: providing for student ownership, treating students as individuals, and promoting reflection through writing. Like others who have implemented portfolios, Seaman discovered that his classroom role shifted to facilitator, changing his professional identity.

“Making Mentoring Visible,” by Dede Yow, makes apparent the often overlooked but central place of mentoring in teaching. Mentoring, while formally recognized institutionally on all educational levels, is generally not compensated in time or payment, Yow points out. Paying particular attention to the university setting, Yow’s chapter gives a voice to the mentoring that is inherent in all meaningful teaching relationships.

Essays by Writing Group Two: Looking Closely at Classroom Practices

Both of the essays by this writing group’s members offer detailed examination of particular classroom innovations, set in the context of ongoing developments in humanities education that are compatible with writing as a vehicle for learning.

In “Sharing Journal Reflections of Inspiration and Remembrance in Holocaust Studies,” Renee Kaplan describes a Holocaust unit she developed for an eighth-grade gifted class. An essential element in the unit was reflective writing in journals, an activity she did along with her students. Like the other members of her writing group, Kaplan realized how valuable reflection could be in documenting and promoting student understanding.

“Seeing’ Community: Visual Culture in College Composition,” by Sarah Robbins and Linda Stewart, describes efforts to enhance students’ study of local culture. While investigating their teaching in separate freshman composition classes, the authors were both part of a large team of educators funded by the National Endowment of Humanities to create curriculum for community studies. Having used visual culture as an avenue for researching community themselves, they carried these skills into their classrooms.

Essays by Writing Group Three: Designing Writing Programs

The three essays in this section come from an elementary school classroom, a high school English course, and a summer institute for teachers. While the essays were developed by investigating teaching in very different settings, all three seek to carry out ambitious program-level planning for writing instruction.

In “Picture This: Using Wordless Books to Teach Primary-Grade Writers,” Victoria Walker describes a collaborative effort to promote primary students’ narrative writing skills. Walker and a colleague developed a visual literacy approach to guide their young students to understand narrative structure. Reading wordless books, students learned to craft three-part picture narratives and to see themselves as authors. Walker, meanwhile, learned how studying her teaching practice systematically could enhance her curriculum.

Leslie Walker's "Re-envisioning the Writing Classroom" tracks her own development as a teacher of writing. Her growth begins as she reflects on her own high school experiences as a student writer. Walker continues her search by observing two very different teachers at work. She then re-views episodes from her own classroom to reflect on her practice and philosophy so as to reform her teaching.

"Writing Groups Revised: Coaches, Community and Craft in a Summer Institute" examines how one local National Writing Project site conducted a self-study to improve the quality of the writing groups used in its summer institute. Author Andy Smith, working with other teacher-leaders, identified weaknesses in the site's instructional model and then helped develop a new one. Smith's essay describes that process and reflects on its implications for his own teaching and for future programs at the Writing Project site.

Setting the Writing Groups in Context

As engaging pieces of writing in themselves, and through the accounts revisiting their preparation, these essays make an argument for supporting teachers' social networks of learning. This argument is demonstrated in action in "Reading Across Writing Groups," examples of response texts that teachers in our community of practice wrote after reading draft essays by project participants from outside their original writing groups. Our book's central argument is also reinforced by a multi-vocal report from several teachers (Zsa Boykin, Sandra Grant, Toby Emert, and Scott Smoot) who served as the "first readers" for our entire manuscript. When we asked this team to review our draft essays, we had in mind using their comments to support revision. But we also hoped that they might situate the learning processes of our larger community of practice in frameworks that could be useful to other educators. They achieved this aim as well, and, appropriately enough, they did so by forming another writing group of their own. Collaboratively recording their reactions to our text, this group has made it possible for later readers to see an example of teachers adapting our work. Along the way, these colleagues extended their own professional roles, including their ability to write for other teachers.

One point these respondents made to us is that other readers would appreciate a close look at the nuts-and-bolts implementation strategies we used to manage the community of practice in which our writing groups were operating. With that in mind, the final chapter in our book revisits our entire inquiry project chronologically. There we describe how our three small writing groups positioned themselves within a larger community support system, which this book's editors monitored and facilitated, partly by orchestrating

reflection exercises in oral discussions and on paper. That closing chapter suggests that teachers who establish their own writing groups may want to position their work to capitalize on institutional resources—whether in their department or school, in a graduate program or a professional organization. We describe ways in which our own larger community of practice, while facilitating shared inquiry, simultaneously provided the writing groups’ participants with a logistical support system and a source of additional knowledge. In addition, that chapter lays out important connections between our project’s emphasis on reflection-based learning and central principles of the writing-to-learn movement, including work on private, semi-public, and published writing as a vehicle for knowledge making.

Endnotes

¹Like Mary Renck Jalongo and her colleagues, we believe that “teachers’ stories, these positive and negative personal accounts of our lives in classrooms, are central to the type of inquiry and reflection that lead to professional development and personal insight” (xvi). Like Anthony Petrosky, we have seen that teachers “create knowledge with language and within a particular educational discourse in response to the various kinds of open-ended problems they solve,” and we agree that this process also contributes to teachers’ sense of their professional identities, so that “they are also created as teachers and thinkers by the language they use” (25).

²See *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation and Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*.

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