

# Part I



## Writing Group One: *Creating Our Professional Identities*





# The Balancing Act: A Play on Managing Our Lives

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## Setting the Stage:

*Enter the teacher, somewhat successfully juggling four balls.*

I have a favorite story. A grandmother once told it, I know. I don't think it was my grandmother although it could have been. This grandmother compared life to a juggling act. "You are juggling four balls," she reminded: "work, family, integrity and health. And it is important to realize that although three of these balls are glass and very easily broken, one is made of rubber and will bounce back if dropped. The rubber ball is work." These words of advice came to mind often in the last couple of years. It is such a simple thought and so very hard to act upon.

This narrative is a reflection on balancing everything I care about in my life and how writing helps me link different yet related demands. I think that many people find themselves in similar "balancing acts." In the succeeding sections of this essay I invite my readers to revisit with me the challenges of writing and reflecting upon the diverse endeavors of a very challenging year: my preparing materials for the national board portfolio, learning from watching lessons videotaped in my classroom, and writing for graduate school classes, as well as preparing meaningful lesson plans for my first grade class, and reflecting on my students' progress. In each case, reflection helped me think about the difficulties and successes of the endeavors. Finally, I will explain how I try to continue to integrate professional learning opportunities and reflective writing into my personal life and why.

I am a teacher, and one of the requirements for becoming a good teacher seems to be proficiency at juggling. We teachers are pulled from every direction: the students, the parents, the school system, the state, and now, more than ever, from the national level. Teachers have information, pressure, and opinions thrust upon them relentlessly and must make choices constantly. My own balancing pressure increased that year when I began a cohort program at the local university, working on a post-masters degree (or a sixth year, Educational Specialist degree). A cohort is a group of teachers working through a degree program together. We began with a "team building" weekend retreat to get to know each other and then met two evenings a week for classes. We also

met daily for six weeks in the summer. The required classes were interwoven, and we constructed knowledge by reflecting on how what we learned affected what we did in the classroom. Whenever I try to explain the idea of a cohort to someone, it seems to be so clear that everything “goes together” and complements both my involvement in the school and work in the classroom. Why then did it feel so, well, tense?

The analogy of balancing never seemed so apt, though, as when I began work on the National Teaching Credential as part of the degree. I started enthusiastically, believing that work on the credential would improve my classroom teaching. After all, wasn't that the point? But frustration set in quickly. If I worked on lesson plans, I didn't have time to work on credential papers. If I worked on the credential, I didn't have time to work on my lesson plans. And when, for pity's sake, was I supposed to work on my cohort “stuff”? It has never been my style to teach “by the book,” and I usually don't repeat activities year to year because each class has a unique personality. However, here I was, copying lessons I had done in the past. Was I compromising my integrity? I can say I enjoyed the challenge of the credential assignments—really! But, I didn't feel I was able to give all I would have liked to my cohort work, credential work, or my classroom that year. Thank heavens for my understanding family and a husband who learned to cook. I began to speculate: maybe this challenge was not a bad thing. Maybe I was learning a valuable lesson.

In the three acts and the curtain call of this essay's “play,” which revisits a busy year combining graduate work and National Board Certification preparation with teaching and family life, I will reflect on my struggles and the strategies I used (with the help of my colleagues) to keep all the balls in the air at once. I hope my story will support other teachers who want to take on professional challenges similar to mine.

## Act I

### In the Classroom

*Setting the stage: Reflecting and writing about my teaching principles in the context of my National Board Portfolio involved consideration of my career in light of each National Board proposition.*

Teacher is pacing, talking to her mirror image

So, beginning with the first challenge! The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) commissioned two comprehensive surveys in early 2001 to examine the impact of their assessment process on teachers.

While many positive and important findings emerged from the two surveys, three stand out:

- The National Board certification process is an excellent professional development experience
- National Board Certified Teachers say that the certification experience has had a strong effect on their teaching
- The certification process has had a positive effect on students and has led to positive interaction with teachers, administrators, and communities (NBPTS Validation Study).

A second study, The Accomplished Teaching Validation Study, conducted by a team of researchers based at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, compared the teaching practices of National Board Certified Teachers with other teachers and compared samples of student work from classrooms of the two groups of teachers. This study, released by the National Board, found that National Board Certified Teachers significantly outperformed their peers who are not board certified on 11 of 13 key dimensions of teaching expertise (NBPTS Impact Survey). Based on this kind of information, striving for National Certification seemed to be worth taking on at this point in my teaching career. The National Board Certification Committee has issued a policy statement: What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do ([www.nbpts.org](http://www.nbpts.org)). This statement identifies a professional consensus on core propositions that distinguish accomplished teaching practices. These are actions that teachers take to advance student achievement, but the propositions also incorporate the essential knowledge, skills, dispositions, and commitments that allow teachers to practice at a highly skilled level. There are only five. With this information in mind, I prepared to create my own national Board portfolio. My reflections on the propositions gave me a sense of achievement, and surely, I thought, I could abridge the process of preparing my portfolio by organizing my goals around these propositions. Below, I will revisit the reflection processes I used to address each of the National Board propositions and thus to begin to construct my portfolio.

*The First proposition: Teachers are committed to students and their learning.* Ironically, teaching is a learning process. I don't believe a good teacher is ever finished learning. Teaching is a challenging, ever-changing career. It is exhaustive and exhilarating. And I believe good teachers make a difference.

So, I reflect. I have had a varied career, with time spent in classrooms from Colorado to California to Georgia, and students who ranged from children of college-educated professionals to recent immigrants and third

generation high school dropouts. My career has also spanned several educational “bandwagons” and survived numerous “policy” changes. I have experienced guiding my own three children through LD (Learning Disabled), Gifted, and ADDH (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity) programs as well. I understand the importance of one teacher in a child’s life, and I take my responsibility seriously.

My experience has taught me to watch out for those children who learn “differently.” I believe all students can learn, and it is my challenge to find the key to teaching them. At the fall Open House, my talk to the parents emphasizes that I “begin where your children are and take them as far as they will go.” The only set curriculum is the general guidelines provided by my district and state. Then, I make goals for individuals, based upon the general goals of the grade level, but not restricted by them. I spend a lot of time getting to know each child and continue to listen and monitor learning one-on-one throughout the year. I have found that a teacher can never expect too much from a child. I strive to be a mediator of students and their environment. Children want to learn, and I want to provide the means for them to learn. For example, a few years ago I taught a multi-age (kindergarten/first grade) class in a lower socio-economic area where several of my students were Spanish speakers with no prior school experience. Since there were fewer boundaries to the curriculum, many of the kindergarteners learned alongside the first graders. My best student at the end of the year was a bright five year-old who had come into the class speaking only Spanish. I could have written him off. I am awfully glad I didn’t. He watched the other children and expected to do what they were doing. He wasn’t restricted to doing “kindergarten/ESOL activities.” Re-thinking this experience, I make it the centerpiece of my National Board writing on proposition one.

*Second proposition: Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.* I think I enjoy teaching because I had such a good time when I was in school. Now my students and I learn together. We believe the world is a fascinating place, full of interesting elements. I don’t have any favorite subjects, and I rarely repeat lessons because of the variety available and the differences in groups every year. Experience has also taught me to connect learning to prior knowledge. I ask young children to tell me what they know and then give them new knowledge based on what they know. Experience has taught me to allow students to construct learning based upon their prior knowledge. Since I am a primary teacher, I also spend a great deal of time and effort educating my students’ parents, and I want them to feel we are a team working together for the success of their child. I realize as I write the reflections on these beliefs and practices that I can incorporate them into my National Board Portfolio.

*Third Proposition: Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning.* Ah, the management question! I have found acting is a big part of teaching. I enjoy entertaining my students and getting them to participate in lessons with me. I have dozens of “hooks” that help them remember and understand. I know I was a visual learner and a kinesthetic learner, so I make a point to incorporate movement and/or pictures and charts to reach different types of students. I consider ways of “picturing” this important part of my teaching in my National Board portfolio.

*Fourth proposition: Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience.* I have decided children learn best when challenged. The harder children work on solving a problem, the more they understand the concepts. I like to see my students accept the responsibility of working through problems by themselves or with their peers. I expect them to be accountable, to do their best and to be responsible for their own successes. Hence, I spend most of my teaching time working with small groups or one-on-one. The students write in journals, individually learning at their own pace. I teach them to find a book that is “just right” for them and read it to me. I base what I teach on individual assessments as the children work. As I reflect on how important individualization is to my teaching, I realize I will need to exemplify this dimension of my teaching in student artifacts and my own analysis.

*Fifth proposition: Teachers are members of learning communities.* Teaching is learning so I spend a great deal of time listening to other teachers tell of their experiences, reading professional journals like *The Reading Teacher*, and authors like Donald Graves or Reggie Routman, searching for new ideas. I enjoy taking part in “focus” groups with other teachers of different grade levels, looking into different challenges in teaching. I take advantage of our school district’s professional development opportunities, and I attained a sixth-year degree in teacher leadership after fifteen years of teaching. The cohort program was especially rewarding because of the dedication, variety, and enthusiasm of the participants. It affirms for me why I do what I do. And having discussions with teachers I admire opens my mind to alternative approaches to teaching objectives. I decide to talk about these networks in my portfolio.

Looking back on my preparation of the National Board portfolio, I see its benefits. Measuring myself against the National Board standards required me to think differently about my teaching. I conclude that teaching is learning, and learning is a challenge no matter how old you are. My past experience in educating children is building my philosophy and will create a strong foundation for my current and future teaching challenges. My written reflections, enshrined in an organized notebook, serve as a reminder when the

busyness of daily life crowds out hard-learned lessons. The process helped me organize my philosophy and set my goals higher. Accomplishing National Board Certification assured me I was on the right track. I found the National Board standards have changed what we all think about teaching. They are written to guide teachers in their own work, inform parents and communities about what constitutes accomplished classroom practice, and instill teachers with the respect that comes from identifying, reaching toward, and meeting lofty standards. I am reaching. This ball is still in the air!

## Act II

*Setting the stage: Planning and writing about videotaped lessons in my classroom involved projecting student behavior based upon my experience with children and then reflecting on their learning from the prospective of an observer.*

### Teacher with videotaping camera

The National Board Process requires that teachers videotape themselves giving a lesson. Sounds easy enough. I mean, I knew that I would have to set the situation up carefully and probably bribe the children to behave, but I am confident enough to know that when I am “on” I can perform pretty well. The challenge of planning the lesson was exciting. However, I didn’t anticipate camera problems or six-year-olds being intimidated by a microphone. I think we videotaped six times—obviously it isn’t as straightforward as it seemed it would be.

My first lesson required combining a social studies objective with an art objective. In Social Studies lessons I strive to model social skills that are appropriate for this developmental level and that will help the children later function effectively as citizens. I also strive to create a democratic classroom. We gather regularly as a group for class meetings, write our own classroom rules, bring problems to discuss within the group, and the majority vote rules in many decisions. The children take their part seriously and make every effort to be very fair in their discussions.

Leading up to the lesson featured in the video, the class worked on projects in teams. I wanted the students to discover they needed to cooperate and to communicate with each other in order to get the projects done to their satisfaction. We had several discussions in class meetings about the “rules” needed for teamwork, and the class deliberated on how to avoid problems within the working group. First graders are moving from the self-centered, winner-takes-all personality of a five-year-old into a stage where peer relationships are more important. While still feeling strongly about fairness and right/wrong, first graders are beginning to understand the feelings of others.

The lesson goal was to create a school flag. I planned carefully, trying to anticipate possible pitfalls. Together we wrote and posted a working plan for our cooperative groups to follow. I stressed that the effort had to show cooperation and that the resulting final design had to reflect the consensus of the group.

In planning the lesson, I had to keep reminding myself of the overall instructional goals. The requirements were to combine social studies and art. Because I generally teach thematically, this request seemed reasonable at first. But the lesson seemed isolated and forced. Looking back, I think the “big picture” of the unit was lost because I put so much effort into the specific lesson that was to be videotaped. I regularly use art as part of my instruction, but my efforts to make sure I covered the art objectives forced the lesson to become stilted. On the positive side, this requirement taught me to think more critically about how I include art in my lessons. It forced me to think of art in a more serious way.

The lesson went well. The videotaping did not. I was surprised that the understanding of symbolism came so easily to first graders. “The cheetah paw prints say that we are fast learners!” “We put on a sun because we are so bright!” There was lots of noise and excitement in the room, and the words of the children were lost in the din. But the major problem was a glitch in the tape: it skipped, blacking out every few seconds. We did the lesson again with a slightly different twist—but the magic was lost. I never would have done the same lesson twice anyway, and now I know why.

I planned another lesson, got a better microphone, set up the cooperative groups, and tried again. Incorporating art objectives remained difficult for me. Watching the video, I learned a lot about the way I teach. I talk too much, I make funny faces, and I have certain expressions I use over and over. But I saw and heard good things too. While writing the required reflection for the National Board entry, I realized that the social studies objectives were difficult for first graders. But I determined that the practice with cooperative work had paid off. I found that the staged “discussion” never turned out as well as an impromptu discussion. And I found I didn’t hear what the children were saying when I was worried about leading the discussion a certain way.

I worked on the second video incorporating math and science during a weather unit. Planning was easier, although having the second objective was still complicated. I think I wanted to give math and science equal billing, and that is impossible. In the reflective writing, I found I was leaning toward using math in a natural, meaningful way, but the emphasis on defining math objectives and making sure they were addressed stilted the lessons. When I teach inquiry science, I just want to teach science. I want the math to come in logically. Being forced to include math objectives put a damper on

the lessons. But National Board writers have these objectives in mind for a reason. Perhaps I needed to look at those lessons from a different perspective. What is it that Piaget says—the feeling of disequilibria is needed in order to learn? (Woolfolk 53).

As I organized and packed the videotapes and written entries to send to the National Board, I realized what a powerful tool the process of writing and reflection had become for me. Teachers are not generally called on to reflect deeply on their practice. A principal rarely asks for reflections when he or she does evaluations. But the process of writing the reflections helped me think through what had happened, to see the process as an outsider. Writing also helped me realize where a lesson was really good and where it was not so good, helped me organize my thoughts, and helped me set goals. In the study that looked at the Impact of National Board Certification on teachers, eighty-three percent of National Board certified teachers said they have become more reflective about their teaching. One respondent commented, “One of the strongest points of Board Certification is the reflective nature of the process. You cannot go through the process without it affecting the way you look at and try to improve every aspect of your teaching” (The Impact of National Board Certification on Teachers: A survey of National Board Certified Teachers and Assessors 4). Sharing my reflections with my writing companions in my cohort also gave me perspective on what I was learning and provided thought-provoking insight and new ideas. Our “A-ha!” moments, struggles with meeting the objectives, and successes tied our experiences together, and we learned from each other. Research concurs. Among teachers who report a high sense of efficacy, who feel successful with students, it has been noticed that even if these teachers differ along a number of dimensions—age and experience, subject area, and even conceptions of pedagogy—all shared one characteristic: membership in some kind of a strong professional community (Grimmet 33). Working with a group of teachers from the cohort, reaching toward the goal of National Certification, gave me inspiration, validation, and encouragement.

### Act III: Making Connections The Conclusion?

*Setting the stage: Suddenly, with reflection, writing for three different yet intertwined purposes, had a common thread—Eureka!*

Teacher sitting surrounded by a partially constructed house

My cohort program philosophy is as follows: “The program is based upon the assumption that learning is a constructive process that builds on the knowledge and experience of the learner. Through an integrated approach

that provides choices and opportunities for decision-making and dynamic group interactions, the program is constructed around academic givens, and participants will partner with faculty to shape the paths by which content is learned” (Program Description published by Georgia State University). Research shows growing evidence that collaborations, coalitions, and partnerships provide opportunities for teachers to develop a community of shared understanding that enriches their teaching while providing the intellectual and emotional stimulation necessary for enduring personal and professional growth and development. And joining informal groups, such as the multi-grade focus group I worked with at my school, helps teachers to develop stronger voices to represent perspectives, learn to exercise leadership among peers, and use firsthand experience to create new possibilities for students through collaborative work (Lieberman 194). Milbrey McLaughlin has found that successful teachers, without exception, single out their professional community as the source of their professional motivation (Senge 1995, 326). I see now that this philosophy can apply not only to my participation in the cohort program, but also to my own classroom and to teachers in workshops I have taught.

Upon reflection, I believe that learning is a constructive process with adults as well as children. This awareness has changed the way I approach teaching. When I have facilitated learning, I have been astonished by what children know, and I realize I have failed to take into account what adults know (or do not know). As a result of becoming aware of the constructivist philosophy, I have begun to allow choices and opportunities for decision-making in my classroom more than I have in the past, but I feel I can do more. I believe it is important that students know they have a say in what we study and how we go about it. I have tried to be flexible and let the students influence decisions that affect their daily lives, and I have been astonished at how clever their ideas are. Michael suggested we change class jobs each week rather than each day, so the student would have more practice and do the job better. Will brought in a tadpole he had caught and thought that we ought to learn about frogs and keep an observational journal about this tadpole. Laura suggested we keep the bird identification books over by the window. Jacob asked if some of the students could sketch the ants while out at recess. My students were taking charge of their own learning.

I have encouraged choices and opportunities for decision-making while working with a group of teachers, but I have had to push and shove them to accept the opportunities. Is this because they were not allowed choices when they were in school? I have become aware that sharing lessons is not enough to help other teachers improve their teaching. Sharing reflections and analysis is

what helps teachers learn, and modeling accomplished teaching can be done when working with adults. More and more, I have dynamic group interactions with my students and enthusiastic discussions showing high interest. And, with the adults, there is the hint of passion when we talk about perhaps having the power to influence school policy. It is building.

Suddenly I realize the different strands (areas of study) of the cohort have melted together. It has become difficult to see where one began and another left off. I suppose that was really the goal. On the other hand, I can see the parts within the whole. I can see constructivism in my National Certification write-up. I can see a teacher-leadership influence in my ways of handling people. I know laws influence how we must behave, and I know a school must move together with a strong cohesive philosophy. I see the connections when I go to meetings about using computers in the classroom to “build” knowledge and experience. I see the connections when I define my philosophy of teaching. I see the connections when I make choices about what I am going to teach.

The process of reflecting on my teaching while working on national certification and discussing my thoughts and dilemmas with other professionals has helped me realize my classroom was more teacher-centered than I would like. As a result, I worked to change the way I obtain responses from students, allowing them to think more for themselves. I had a base of knowledge I didn't even realize I had until I began the process: how teachers reach children, how they work with parents, how they reach out into the community. I had taken these interactions for granted. To realize that I had this depth of knowledge that I didn't know I had was life-changing. The national board process gave me a new kind of respect and appreciation for teaching. This awareness and subsequent changes I made have had an impact on me, and on my students, forever. If there is a problem in the process, it is that the reflection is never done.

Solution: Time to think. Time to digest. Time to plan. Balance.

### **Curtain Call**

*Spotlight finds lone figure precariously juggling four balls on empty stage.*

Time adds dimension to all experiences. For a year I was caught up in a balancing act with little time to stand back and really see where I was. The balls I juggled never fell, but my concentration was so intense I didn't notice the world around me. I was limited to the task at hand. I had forgotten that I am a person.

I passed the national boards, I was selected Teacher of the Year at my school, and when I was asked about my hobbies I had to say: “School IS my hobby.” It sounded like a joke, but I realized it was true. Being a teacher is my identity. I spend most waking hours thinking about my students or lessons. I

had forgotten the grandmotherly advice that in life I am juggling four balls: work, family, integrity and health. My family is waiting patiently for me to learn how to balance, and my body is telling me I need to pay attention to its care. Like any addiction, it will take some time to overcome this obsession.

Unexpectedly, my successes have made it harder to balance. My name has now been added to a new list—teacher leaders. New opportunities have arisen to use what I have learned to help others. I felt myself again looking at a future crowded with choices. But I have constructed a new philosophy out of the confusion of the past. When asked to contribute to a discussion group or work on a project, I consider the results in the light of the students. Will it help me help them? My participation in my graduate cohort and the writing group for this book encouraged me to verbalize my beliefs about teaching. Involvement with other professionals has encouraged me to clarify my teaching philosophy, which enables me to focus on what I know is good teaching. I will continue to integrate professional learning opportunities into my personal life when it benefits the children I teach but I will consider family commitments and activities outside of teaching as necessary to keeping me from growing tired and stale.

I also realize the importance of professional community. Ann Lieberman noted in an article on practices that support teacher development, that networks, collaborations, and partnerships provide teachers with professional learning communities that support changed teaching practices. McLaughlin has found that successful teachers, without exception, single out their professional communities as the source of their professional motivation. I continue to grow through contact with my “professional family.” Involvement with my cohort members continues even after our graduation. We regularly call each other just to talk about teaching issues and to bounce ideas back and forth. My involvement with the National Writing Project gave me a second group of strong teacher leaders from a wider range of teaching experiences and levels. Our common interest in long-term, continuous learning with the support of colleagues is nurturing and supportive of my goals. Sustained contact with these professionals, whom I trust and admire, continues to stimulate and enrich my teaching.

I love being a teacher, but I am a better teacher when I come in refreshed, feeling loved, and healthy. I am also a better teacher when I can exchange ideas and observations with professional friends. Just as I set priorities in the classroom, I need to set priorities in my life. And I need to pause, so as to have the time and energy to reflect.

So far, I still haven’t dropped a ball. Perhaps those who read this narrative will recognize themselves and do a bit of juggling!

## Reflection

*As a primary elementary teacher, I had little experience writing for an adult audience before joining this book's inquiry community, but I have always enjoyed writing for pleasure, and I had been working on my writing for several years when this project began. In 2000, I had applied for the National Writing Project summer institute at Kennesaw State. Learning with teachers from all grade levels during the institute opened a new world for me. Working together in this non-threatening environment, we came to trust each other and wrote from our hearts. We pored over each other's work in small groups and coached each other. My confidence grew. Despite a lack of time for writing once the school year began again, I kept in touch with the fellows from my institute "class" and grew in knowledge through active discussions via computer. My experience coincides with research which indicates that networks, coalitions, and partnerships provide opportunities for teachers to commit in small and large ways to topics that are of intrinsic value to them or that develop out of their work (Little and McLaughlin). And I found that engaging in this new professional opportunity put me into an exciting and powerful cycle: the more I learned, the more open to new possibilities I was, and the more I wanted to learn. My own experience matches observations made in articles on teacher development and professional learning (Grimmet).*

*Interestingly, much of the work on National Board Certification involves reflection on teaching—through writing! Having learned the art of working collaboratively during my time with the Writing Project institute, I was not intimidated by the National Board writing demands that were folded into a graduate program in which I enrolled soon after I affiliated with the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project. After my positive experience with writing groups during the institute, I was at ease working with my classmates in my graduate school cohort as we prepared our National Board entries. We discussed, rewrote, coached each other, and learned from each other's writing. The cohort also required that we write "Benchmark" papers every semester and a "Capstone" project upon conclusion of the program. These were essentially reflections on what we had learned and how it influenced our teaching. About the middle of the program, I was feeling the frustration of juggling so many endeavors: graduate classes, National Board requirements, and writing papers, on top of the daily routine of a classroom teacher. Writing about this challenge for one of my Benchmark pieces made it more manageable. I felt I had more of a handle on the situation after working through the frustration in writing and sharing my reflections with members of my cohort. Realizing I am not the only teacher facing these challenges and knowing others are contemplating attempting National Certification, I was excited about sharing my observations and insights with*

others, so I eagerly volunteered when our NWP site leaders invited teachers to participate in a project that would assemble writing groups into an inquiry community whose members would also be studying the process of our work in those groups. I felt ready to share my writing with a larger professional audience beyond my graduate school cohort.

I planned to expand the mid-course Benchmark reflection I had written during my graduate program, and I looked forward to the opportunity to join a new collaborative team, since my past group learning experiences had been so positive. But the experience of this writing group turned out to be even better than I anticipated. Unexpectedly, writing this essay brought back the thoughts and insights I had had while writing the original Benchmark and allowed me to evaluate how my teaching had changed because of going through the process of the graduate work and national board certification. I realized I was thinking much more deeply about the process of learning going on in my classroom. This writing moved me forward in my growth as a teacher.

The writing group I joined for this project shaped my essay in significant ways. Being in a group with members from different grade levels was especially helpful since I was hoping to write for a broad audience of educators. My teammates were comfortable speaking up when they did not understand what I was trying to say in my initial drafts. They asked questions of genuine interest, coming from their different experiences and backgrounds. Because I am a primary elementary teacher, what I do in a lesson was sometimes confusing to my group members, who teach in college and high school. Often they were unaware of the developmental process of teaching reading and writing at my level.

And when my teammates read my writing and asked for clarification, I had to really think about what I meant to say. No pretty sounding words or clichés would do. “What exactly does ‘constructivism’ look like in a primary classroom?” they asked. “Do you really feel you can individualize during journal writing?” “How can a multi-grade discussion group of teachers help the teaching of writing?” I had to make them UNDERSTAND what I was saying—which meant I had to understand myself. Through this process of addressing my group’s questions, I clarified my own thinking and refined my essay.

Challenging as this work could be, it was also very affirming. I learned that what I had to say was important and that my feelings and understandings were not unique to me, or even just to elementary teachers. This growing awareness built my confidence as a writer and an educational leader. I learned to value myself as a professional. I learned that no matter what age student I teach, there are many things I have in common with other teachers. This knowledge helped me see I could be successful in new areas beyond the primary classroom. I am now helping to lead a graduate school cohort, which will be together for 15 months. I am regularly

drawing on my experience in our writing group. For example, having learned about the power of a risk-free environment, I know that it is important for these new graduate students to learn about each other, so they can respect each other and feel free to express their own beliefs without apprehension. So, I have arranged time for "team building" activities.

The collegial atmosphere of my writing group also gave me a new perspective on my classroom teaching, adding depth and understanding to my thinking. I now realize that effective teaching involves conscious reflection and deliberation concerning students and the curricula.

Reflective writing on teaching is now an important, regular part of my continuing professional growth. My writing facilitates documentation, student assessments, and classroom observations as well as helping me connect my current and past experiences. Written reflection is like a conversation with myself. Writing allows me to verbalize what I see happening in my classroom, something I often don't take time to do. I defend, question, organize, and clarify my thoughts in writing.

My writing group also helped change me as a learner. Now I do not feel comfortable working on my own. I value other people's opinions and inspirations. I need other people's feedback and encouragement. When we learn collaboratively, we are not isolated, shut off in rooms with closed doors. We all have the same goal—influencing others to join us in being lifelong learners.

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