Teacher Quality: Teachers Teaching Teachers

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"Teachers teaching teachers is like the blind leading the blind," a literacy "expert" told senior Portland Public Schools (PPS) administrators in the fall of 2005, while discussing my three-year writing proposal, which included classroom teachers sharing strategies and lessons to improve writing in Portland's elementary schools. Instead, elementary teachers will get yet another outside expert with a program and a large price tag.

During my seven years as a curriculum specialist designing professional development in Portland Public Schools, I wanted teachers to see themselves as curriculum producers, as creative intellectuals rather than technicians serving out daily portions of someone else's packaged or downloaded materials. I attempted to create spaces where teachers could work together to develop their own curriculum and discuss education issues.

School districts write mission statements about creating citizens of the world, but more and more, they want teachers to become robotic hands who deliver education programs designed and shipped from sites outside of our classrooms.

If we want an educated citizenry, we need teachers who know how to think about their students' needs and write their own curriculum in community with others.

In recent years, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has pushed administrators to grab quick solutions to get a fast "bump" in their test scores. Instead of taking the time to build teacher capacity by improving instruction or creating schools as learning communities where teachers have opportunities to have honest discussions about classroom practice, share successful lessons and strategies, or examine student work together, more and more administrators opt for what I call "boxed" professional development — from fill-in-the-blank writing curricula to "stick-the-kid-on-the-computer" reading and math programs.

When high school language arts teachers in Portland were asked by the Professional Development Committee — a group founded by the school district and the Portland Association of Teachers — which professional development programs had the greatest impact on their students' learning, they overwhelmingly named the Portland Writing Project, the Summer Literacy Curriculum Camp, and the Professional Development Days — which were all led by classroom teachers.

Teachers stated that these three programs were practical and related specifically to their content. The programs gave them models of new strategies and curricula, hands-on practice, and time for collaboration and implementation. Teachers also said they appreciated the support of ongoing professional development, instead of the one-shot variety. What struck me in reading the surveys and talking with teachers was that the top-down approach of telling teachers what to do without engaging them in active learning is as ineffective in professional development as it is in the classroom.

In the same way that some teachers insult students by assuming that they have no knowledge, history, culture, or language, some schools and school districts insult teachers by assuming that they come to professional development without any prior knowledge or expertise. For example, last year a literacy "expert" came to town with her bag of tricks. She landed at a school that had a literacy team representing teachers across the disciplines. Instead of finding out what they knew, she proceeded to teach them about "think alouds," graphic organizers, textbook previewing, and reading strategies they'd already been implementing in their classrooms.

Another common professional development pitfall is the series of overheads, which is currently being replaced by the dancing PowerPoint presentation, with too-simple bulleted points about complex issues like inclusion of special education students or English Language Learners in mainstream classrooms, as if naming a problem constituted addressing it. Without any modeling, discussion, or time to plan for implementation, the leaders of these inoculation sessions expect teachers to take the theory back and apply it in their classrooms. This is like taking students to the Louvre, showing them great art, and expecting them to reproduce it without giving them any lessons on drawing and painting.

Portland Writing Project

The Portland Writing Project (PWP), a collaboration between Portland Public Schools and the Oregon Writing Project at Lewis & Clark College, is one of the 189 sites of the National Writing Project (NWP). The Portland Writing Project models the pedagogy it hopes teachers will take back to their classrooms, but it also encourages teachers to constantly reflect on their classroom practice and revise their teaching based on their observations. Like the NWP, the PWP doesn't preach one way to teach writing; it teaches the writing process. But in Portland, we also help teachers learn to develop their own curriculum.

Every summer for most of the past 20 years, 25 K-12 Portland Public Schools teachers have gathered to share writing strategies and lessons with each other during an intensive (9 a.m. to 4 p.m.) four-week class; they receive 10.5 university credits for participating. At our site, my co-director and I choose a multicultural novel that situates our teaching in a period of U.S. history, so that teachers can learn to integrate history, reading, novel study, writing, and students' lives into their lessons.

For a number of years we read *Nisei Daughter*, Monica Sone's autobiography, which takes place during the Japanese-American internment. The participants, co-directors, and I developed role plays and writing assignments using the book, primary source documents, children's books, or other parallel texts on the topic. While the co-directors and I provide the framework for the summer institute, each teacher develops and teaches a writing lesson that contributes to the unit. For example, Alexis Aquino-Mackles, a first-grade teacher, read a section of *Nisei Daughter* that described how Sone's family burned "everything Japanese: Japanese dolls, music, swords, Japanese poetry." Then she read a section from *Farewell to Manzanar* where a Japanese-American mother breaks her family's heirloom dishes one at a time rather than sell them to the

vultures who lurked in Japanese-American neighborhoods during the evictions and bought families' valuables at ridiculously low prices prior to the internment. She gave each member of our class a broken piece of pottery and had us write an interior monologue from the character's point of view about that moment.

Tanya McCoy, a high school science teacher, asked each of us to bring a baggie full of soil from our garden. After conducting experiments on the soil and discussing how different the soil would be in the mostly desert-like settings of the internment camps, we wrote about our experiments.

Our intention is not for teachers to grab this particular unit and slavishly follow the lessons; instead we aim to equip teachers to think in interdisciplinary terms and see themselves as curriculum developers, not consumers of other people's curriculum. The work around *Nisei Daughter* is an important example, but only because it provides a model for how teachers of any grade level or content area might approach developing units of study. I intentionally model curriculum that struggles with racism and inequality of all kinds, that encourages teachers to think about engaging students in why there is inequality and oppression, and that looks for places of solidarity, hope, and alternatives.

All the teachers in the PWP also participate in reading groups, writing response groups, role plays, and simulations. They write every assignment. They learn the strategies by *doing* the strategies, not by having someone *talk about* "participatory, engaging, hands-on curriculum." They know revision strategies because they use them as they write and revise their own narratives, essays, and poetry. They can teach students methods for opening narratives or strategies for knocking their classmates' socks off with their dialogue because they learn how to write like writers during the institute. Teachers also reflect after each activity on how they will use or adapt the strategies in their classrooms. They meet in grade-level groups throughout the four weeks to plan for the following year. It is their activity, their plans, and their growth that provides the content and the goal of this kind of professional development.

The intent of the PWP is not to "fix" broken teachers; it provides a rich environment for teachers to practice literacy, to have hard conversations about thorny issues that surface in their classroom practice. This is the kind of dialogue that simply can't happen in top-down trainings or when teachers are handed a packaged curriculum created at Princeton.

Of course, not all teachers who attend the summer institute bring stellar practice. Some are victims of bad writing instruction themselves; others have internalized the need to look outside of their classroom for answers, to find an expert or guru to follow instead of becoming their own experts. During the four weeks, the co-directors and I work with participants to tease out what they do know and what they can share. We try to validate and expand their knowledge — in the same way we respond to students in our classrooms.

PWP teachers continue to meet monthly during the year following the summer institute. (Some teachers have continued to come to these meetings for a number of years, and almost 100 teachers gather for our yearly writing retreat in February.) They discuss the implementation of strategies in their classroom. They bring in student work to examine, successful lessons to share, and problems to ponder and solve.

Because many teachers have not *experienced* a classroom that engages their hearts and minds while also teaching them to read and write critically, it is essential that professional development do more than *describe* good classroom practice. We can't just hand teachers a program to implement. Teachers need to participate in this kind of

pedagogy as a student experiences it in order to understand why this kind of instruction is necessary. For example, Ellie Hakala, a second-year language arts teacher, said at our October PWP meeting, "I never realized how important students' sharing their work was until I went through the Writing Project. When I wrote a great piece, I wanted everyone to hear it, not just my small group. I wanted to hear what others had written. Now my students want to share all the time as well."

Summer Curriculum Camps

In collaboration with a group of language arts teachers representing each of our high schools, I designed the Curriculum Camp specifically to give teachers time to create curriculum and to bring a more diverse, multicultural, contemporary reading list into our high school language arts classrooms. Instead of just buying the books and putting them in bookrooms across the city, I wrote a grant to pay teachers to come together and write curriculum guides to help teach the novels. Of course, it would have been cheaper and faster to buy pre-packaged curriculum for teachers to open each fall and follow the directions. But our group wanted to hone teachers' capacities to create curriculum from the ground up, so we chose to take the time and spend the money to share and build teacher knowledge. Because the novels, like the ones we chose for the Portland Writing Project, included sensitive cultural, racial, and gender issues as well as historic events that not all teachers were familiar with, we knew it was important to spend time researching background knowledge and talking about how to teach the novels. We wanted to expand the repertoire of instructional strategies that teachers use, but we also wanted to link those strategies to deeper, more challenging content.

Our intent was to integrate the canon, but also to share the expertise of our skilled teachers as we wove reading and writing strategies into these study guides. (Many of these teachers participated in the Portland Writing Project sometime during the past 20 years.) Many of us needed to learn how to teach reading and writing skills more effectively. Using the PWP model of teachers teaching teachers, we took turns teaching workshops that shared effective strategies while we built our units.

We received a grant from the privately funded Portland Public School Foundation for $40,000 — enough to purchase sets of books for every high school and to pay two teachers from each school their hourly wage for 30 hours of work. Other teachers volunteered to come for credit. They were hungry for a community where they could learn and share with each other. At the end of the first summer one teacher wrote, "I have learned that we are our best resources."

Six years later, we continue to meet for a week each summer, scrounging money from various grants or the district's coffers. In fact, more than 90 percent of PPS high school language arts teachers, as well as a number of ESL, special education, and social studies teachers, have attended at least one summer camp.

We spend part of each morning discussing provocative readings and topics or attending reading or writing workshops that participants asked us to provide. We talk about the tough issues: How to differentiate our curriculum with an increasingly diverse student body, how to work with students who don't speak or write Standard English, how to teach students to design their own essay topics. Then teachers move into work groups to develop curriculum on new novels, nonfiction texts, or hot topics. For example, teachers have created curriculum on *Persepolis, Kite Runner, Fences, Thousand Pieces of Gold,* as well as *Fast Food Nation, Nickel and Dimed*, and *Smoke Signals.* (For a full list see High School Literature Sets at: http://159.191.14.139/docs/pg/914)

The curriculum camp provides another lesson for professional development: New

teachers need time to grow their practice with skilled professionals. During the Summer Curriculum Camp first-year teachers and veteran teachers a year or two from retirement work side-by-side developing curriculum and learning new skills. As one first-year teacher wrote, "Being new to teaching, the greatest thing about the Literacy Project has been . . . learning tons about everything, soaking up as much as I can. Up to this point, I really had a limited collection of strategies to use."

During the first summer of the literacy camp, I told my colleagues that I was less interested in the curriculum guides we produced than the process of teachers working together and learning from each other. Mistake. The guides are also important. They are the written legacy of our summer work. But the guides also indicate our curricular weaknesses and blind spots. Some are brilliant. Others limp along with too many Internet downloads and not enough inspired teaching. Some miss the point.

After each summer, I review the guides to see what lessons we learned and what we missed as we create our work for the following summer.

If we purchased guides for the books or distributed anthologies with questions and writings mapped out for the teachers, we would miss these opportunities to learn together to build curriculum for the students who populate *our* schools. While published guides may be slicker in presentation than ours, they lack the creative struggle of teachers making decisions about the *best* way to introduce the book, the *best* way to teach *how* to read this particular text.

Professional Development Days

How do teachers get better at their craft? How do we create "life-long learners" in the teaching profession? If we don't reach beyond our classrooms to learn new strategies or engage in debates with our colleagues, we can grow rigid and narrow. No matter how long we've been teaching or how good we are, we can always benefit from gathering with colleagues and sharing new curriculum ideas and strategies, talking about new issues that have surfaced, or discussing old issues that we still need to tackle.

As teachers, professional development needs to provide us with time-outs from our work, so we can step back and ask the questions about our daily practice that needle us. We need time to think, discuss, debate, find new strategies and resources for our classrooms and ourselves. Too often professional development is provided in tiny morsels from 3:30 to 5:30 after we have taught all day — or squeezed into an hour one morning a month. Fortunately, the Portland Association of Teachers and Portland Public Schools hammered out an agreement to provide five paid professional development days for teachers each year. Originally, the days were set aside to give teachers time to become familiar with the state standards, work samples, and scoring rubrics. Typically, these days have been divided between school-based professional development and district professional development.

During the seven years I worked as the high school language arts curriculum specialist, I met regularly with the high school literacy leaders, a group comprised of one language arts liaison from every comprehensive and alternative high school. Together, we decided to commit our professional development days to disseminating the curriculum guides developed during the summer, sharing strategies, discussing the impact of district or state initiatives on our classrooms (like high school reform), or bringing in occasional speakers to address hot issues, like untracking.

A few years ago we started developing interdisciplinary workshops with social studies,

ESL, and special education teachers. These days broke us out of our classrooms and content areas to share our practice, but also helped us disseminate the curriculum we developed each summer. During this time, we engaged as intellectuals with other teachers in meaningful discussions about our content — and the world. Instead of sitting in rows, listening to some "expert" tell us about effective classroom practice, we experience it with our colleagues.

For example, on a recent professional development day, Carmel Ross and Lisa Walker, two of the teachers who developed curriculum for *Bronx Masquerade*, shared one of the strategies from their summer work. They led participants on a treasure hunt, a pre-reading activity that develops background knowledge prior to entering a unit of study. Their interactive workshop taught about the main characters of the Harlem Renaissance and demonstrated how to get "TAG, ELL, SPED, and Johnny out of their seats and into your curriculum."

In another workshop, Hyung Nam, a social studies teacher, led language arts, social studies, and ESL colleagues in a lesson on "Institutional Racism and Segregation in the Post-Civil Rights Era and in Portland." His lesson centered on two central questions: How do segregation and racial disparities persist after the Civil Rights Era? How does Portland's history with segregation and environmental racism compare to the national history? Hyung's lessons explored the multiple causes of racial segregation and environmental racism while helping students understand how institutional racism is perpetuated today. His workshop included a mock tribunal and examination of local history with ongoing segregation and racism.

Teachers not only learned new pedagogy, they walked away with information, including handouts and historical documents on the structural features of racism to use with their students. They experienced learning by participating in the trial, not by reading about it. They engaged in conversations about racism in their city and learned how to teach about it at the same time.

Teachers who present — and over the years we have worked to enlist as many teachers as presenters as possible — learn twice as much. They not only engage as participants in the workshops throughout the day, they also gain clarity about their own practice by sharing it with other teachers. In presenting to their colleagues, they teach their lessons, but they also teach the underlying assumptions about good pedagogy and content knowledge that animate their work. Teacher-centered professional development doesn't happen unless district — and school — administrators and curriculum leaders have intimate knowledge of teachers' practice. Just putting teacher X in front of the faculty will not lead to the kind of professional development I am advocating. Curriculum leaders must take the effort to listen to teachers' conversations when they talk about their classrooms and their students, they must observe teachers at work with students and colleagues, and they must look for exemplary practice and curricular expertise. Ultimately, they must have a vision of professional development that puts classroom teachers at the center.

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