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Professional Development for Passionate Teachers: Why University-Based PD is Preferable

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PRACTICE

Professional Development for Passionate Teachers: Why University-Based PD is Preferable

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In recent years, the Michigan Department of Education has significantly revised the rules governing recertification and salary increases, putting a new emphasis on district-provided professional development. While this change may be desirable for some teachers, for us, district-provided PD cannot compare with what we receive from the Eastern Michigan University-based Writing Project (EMWP) and other professional organizations such as the National Writing Project (NWP), the Michigan Council of Teachers of English (MCTE), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). We continue to take graduate courses at EMU and participate in other professional development groups because those are the best PD experiences for us.

We (Kris and lisa) are high school teachers in rural, southeastern Michigan. We met in the Eastern Michigan Writing Project (EMWP) Teacher Research (TR) group many years ago, joining the group after completing the EMWP Invitational Summer Institute in 2002 (lisa) and 2003 (Kris). Since then, we have met monthly with our TR colleagues, raising questions, pursuing answers to them in our research, and going public with our research through writing, submitting articles to professional journals, and by making presentations in our local schools and at state and national workshops and conventions. We are empowered by our monthly TR meetings, so lisa wondered if it might be beneficial for us to bring the kind of professional development we find in the larger group back to our own classrooms in our own rural county. She invited Kris Gedeon to join her in creating "EMWP in Lenawee County." Lisa proposed that we collaborate on a joint teacher research project: we'd meet once a month, take turns visiting each other's classrooms, adopt the teacher-to-teacher PD model to our specific classroom concerns, and see what happened. By working together this way, we hoped to embody and strengthen the NWP ethos in our schools. We also hoped that by meeting where our colleagues may see us, they might become curious about this kind of professional development—the kind that is rooted in mutual respect for the expertise and experience of professionals—and ask to join us.

Lisa's research question was: What happens when EMWP colleagues meet in each other's schools to support one another? Kris agreed to give it a try, and we scheduled our meeting times. We started each meeting by checking in with one another: What's going on in your classes?

Thinking through our days created opportunities for the exchange of ideas on various issues, including: reading and writing workshop, classroom management, work-related stress, mindfulness, student engagement, school improvement, advocacy, and other concerns of professional development and research. These issues arose organically out of our classroom practice.

Our sessions moved naturally to the rhythm of a writing workshop with three major components: time, choice, and feedback. We gave ourselves time, meeting about two hours each month during the school year. We gave ourselves choice in the freedom to focus on our own individual questions, starting each session by asking each other the classic writing workshop prompt: "How's it going?" We gave each other feedback: here's what worked in my classroom, here's what I've tried, and here's what I wonder about now. As with writing workshop in the classroom, the feedback is specifically tailored for our individual concerns.

While school-based PD is often a one-time, one-issue event, the kind of PD our professional network offers allows us to follow our passions as well as make unexpected discoveries that make profound, long-lasting impacts. Kris says,

> I stumbled upon Nancy Atwell while browsing in a bookstore. But stumbling upon resources by accident is not good enough. EMU introduced me to the EMWP. EMWP introduced me to Teacher Research, and EMU professors invited me to present with them my first time at NCTE. Teacher

> Research brought me to lisa. By participating in this PD network, we create an ecology of people and resources around us that is a source of constant nourishment.

A core belief of The National Writing Project is that "teachers who are well informed and effective in their practice can be successful teachers of other teachers as well as partners in educational research, development, and implementation. Collectively, teacher-leaders are our greatest resource for educational reform." We embody this core belief by partnering with one another to support each other's classroom practice, research, and advocacy.

Although it hasn't been easy to schedule our meetings, we have met nearly every month since September 2014. As we know to be true with our Teacher Researcher meetings, even though it is a struggle to make the time and the drive, once we've met, there is no doubt that our time together is time exceedingly well-spent. We leave our meetings excited to get back to our classrooms. An excerpt from the journal lisa wrote after our first meeting in September 2014 expresses this:

> When I drove out of the school parking lot and headed for home, I felt relaxed, affirmed, and energized, much like when I've been to an EMWP Teacher Research meeting. Although many aspects of our meeting will benefit us and our students, such as sharing materials and activities, the feeling of collegiality is the most valuable aspect of our meeting to me, because it came out of PD that grew out of a real need, not out of a top-down mandate. I know that I can trust that what we share with each other is rooted in a deep commitment to help students learn and grow, not striving for profit or power. We are both motivated by love for humanity and a desire to be the best teachers we can be—and that is why we are willing to meet on our own time to share with and nurture one another.

Professional development situated specifically within our rural context fills a real need for us. Kris teaches at a very small school with few opportunities to create professional networks. At her small, rural school, she is the only 9th grade and 12th grade English teacher. There are few opportunities for co-planning with other teachers. Our collaboration fills that need. Lisa also teaches 9th and 12th grade classes, so we can share ideas, lessons, and materials that are specific to the courses we teach and that incorporate the culture of our rural county—and that are rooted in the theory and practice shared by our colleagues at EMU/NCTE/NWP.

While lisa is at a larger school than Kris, she is steadfast in her desire to stay connected to EMU this far along in her career (22 years), and that is mainly because of EMWP. EMWP is part of a large, national network of teachers who are leaders in the profession. We have made personal connections with people through EMU and EMWP, people like Cathy Fleischer, Heidi Estrem, Doug Baker, Jennifer Buehler, and the other amazing teachers in our teacher research group.

We've found other mentors through workshops, professional articles, and books, like Nancie Atwell, Ralph Fletcher, Donalyn Miller, Barry Lane, Penny Kittle, Randy and Katherine Bomer, Tom Romano, Diane Ravitch, Troy Hicks, Donald Graves, Richard Beach, Kelly Gallagher, and Todd DeStigter. These scholars are often the presenters at the state (MCTE) and national (NCTE) professional workshops, and they are the authors of the books we turn to for help with the issues we face in teaching. We trust these presenters, writers, and teachers because:

- they aren't selling a product or a program
- they are classroom teachers who have dedicated their careers to ELA teaching and learning
- they are willing to share their expertise with other teachers because they are dedicated to the profession and want to help other teachers improve their practice
- they are transparent about the theory and methodology that inform their work
- they recognize that teaching and learning are organic processes and that one size does not fit all
- they share experiences that are unique to their contexts and encourage others to adapt their approaches rather than mandating specific procedures and products that limit student (and teacher) choice and voice
- they celebrate approximation, progress, creativity, and innovation in their teaching
- they are often affiliated with universities, NWP, and/or NCTE, professional organizations that uphold the standards of excellence in English education.

What happens when EMWP colleagues meet in each other's schools to support one another? A lot. Because we are part of such an extensive network of amazing educators, thinkers, and writers, our tiny group of two is surrounded and buoyed by all the professionals whose work informs and inspires our own (see Reading List). When we run ideas for our teaching practice by one another, we are also running them by

the vision of literacy that we share with the larger, professional community.

Being a part of this wide-ranging professional community is strikingly different from much of the PD lisa sees at her school. Some school-based PD isolates teachers from the wider professional community, offering only one or two consultants and a website with which to interact after the workshop, with an underlying assumption that there is one "right" way to teach—and if teachers simply "follow the recipe," success is all but guaranteed. Rare is the visiting consultant who could offer the level of knowledge and expertise we find in our EMU/NCTE/NWP network. And in our professional network, when a workshop ends, new relationships have formed, which, in many cases, lead to further collaboration, research, and discovery.

These relationships continue to be nurtured after the workshop as we participate daily in the rich life of our professional online community, through reading and sharing articles and books, and interacting with other members of the community through social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Knowing that we have such expertise and experience in our circle gives us confidence in our work and empowers us to advocate for good practices that, in turn, empower our students.

The teacher-to-teacher model of our project that we learned in the EMWP/NWP community definitely affects the way we think, feel, and behave as professionals. In short, our professional development creates us, and we create our professional development. The most critical aspect of the PD that comes out of these organizations is the respect afforded classroom teachers' experience and expertise. In this model of PD, we teachers are trusted to identify the areas of concern in our practice that become the focus of our efforts to improve. As in great ELA classrooms, this type of PD gives teachers time, choice, and feedback: time to develop our questions and find excellent resources; choice over what to focus on in our research; and feedback from other teachers that helps us see strengths, weaknesses, and possibilities to consider in our work.

During the time of our partnership, lisa has taken on another research question, "What happens when we introduce mindfulness practices in ELA?" Kris has investigated the impact of time, choice, and feedback in reading workshop. Both of us have worked on our own teacher advocacy projects during our partnership as well. Our classroom practices, our research, and our advocacy work are all subjects of discussion during our meetings. Even though we each work on our own unrelated teacher research, what we share with each other is our desire to help students grow as readers, writers, thinkers, and researchers—a desire that is informed by our awareness of our students' needs. The fact that we focus on different topics only broadens our knowledge base and increases the number of tools in our teaching toolbox.

Within the EMU, NWP, and NCTE communities, we feel empowered, affirmed, and energized. The feeling of collegiality is the most valuable aspect of our meeting; knowing that we're a part of a large professional community gives us the strength and courage to speak up for what's right in our own schools, even when it's not popular. The model of PD we create and consume in the EMU/EMWP/NCTE community makes us critical consumers of PD. We demand so much more of PD than a recipe for a one-off activity we can do to increase student engagement, interpret test scores, or incorporate test prep into daily practice. We want PD that helps us empower students as readers, writers, thinkers, citizens, and, most importantly, whole human beings. We want PD that gives us expertise and allies. The EMU/NCTE/NWP community gives us both. In our partnership, we give each other the kind of PD we crave: something that nurtures us where we are, but offers resources to further our development—exactly the kind of experiences we want our students to have in our classrooms. Partly as a result of our work together, we have been empowered to have conversations with colleagues, administrators, school board members, parents, and community members, during which we have begun to advocate for:

- adopting student-centered, inquiry-based classrooms
- authentic project/portfolio assessment
- counting authentic assessment, rather than standardized test scores, as data when describing student achievement
- reducing standardized testing and standardized curricula
- student choice and voice in reading and writing
- writing for real-world audiences and purposes
- reading entire works of literature, not just excerpts
- basing students' reading material on their interests, not Lexile scores
- young adult books in classrooms—for independent and whole-class reading
- independent reading
- reader's and writer's workshop in all ELA classes

- writing on paper and reading paper books for increased learning
- working with the librarian to cull old books and add new ones to encourage students to read
- publicizing the fact that over 850 colleges and universities admit students without standardized test scores (including the university in our county), and that number is growing
- addressing the negative impacts on the curriculum from standardization: a narrowed curriculum, a data-centered instead of student-centered curriculum, and limitations on critical and creative thinking.

There is a lot of talk of accountability in the public narrative on education. Knowing that we'll meet each month has increased our sense of accountability—in a positive way. Because we want to be able to report forward progress to one another when we meet, and because we know that we have one another's support, we are motivated to raise our voices to advocate for our students, as we learned in Cathy Fleischer's summer advocacy class at EMU.

For example, when lisa's students lost learning time due to over-testing, she talked it over with Kris, testing ideas and approaches, knowing that she had to get the content, tone, and timing of the message right. A multi-pronged, long-term campaign was undertaken, requiring meetings with colleagues, administrators, school board members, and parents. It is working and has recently begun to bear fruit; testing has been reduced, and the conversation about testing has transformed into a broader conversation about curriculum. Lisa is now working on the newly formed curriculum committee, where she's advocating for ELA classes, K-12, to be rooted in reading and writing workshop.

Another time, when Kris was so consumed by work-related stress that she couldn't sleep, she tried a mindfulness practice that lisa had been using in her classes and studying as a teacher research project. Although Kris had little faith that it would work for her, in a moment of desperation she tried a mindfulness practice suggested by lisa. Gratefully, she slept that night and could focus on her students the next day.

In addition, even though lisa's school does whole-class reading exclusively, as it has since she began teaching there in 1994, listening to Kris talk with excitement about her research on reading workshop in her classroom has inspired lisa to incorporate book talks into her lessons, in which she promotes YA books that echo the themes or styles of the whole-class reading selections. For each unit, lisa creates a display of YA and other titles from her large classroom library, and she encourages students to find books they enjoy to take home for pleasure reading. She keeps homework assignments to a minimum to allow time at home for reading, and she talks with her students about the books she reads for pleasure.

***Blue 2,* Georgia O'Keeffe**

Finally, along with our inquiry into our classroom practice, we collaborate on a county-wide, day-long fine arts festival; our portion is the creative writing track. Kris coordinates the creative writing track, scheduling workshops with teachers from our network for Lenawee County students, and lisa participates as an instructor for an outdoor writing workshop.

Our knowledge of the ELA workshop and trust in the collaborative process at the core of NWP creates an environment where teens are positively giddy about writing. At the evening performance, as writers perform what they've written for an appreciative crowd of proud parents and community members from around the county, gathered in the fieldhouse at the local university, our hearts swell with pride and gratitude for this special day, a day dedicated to empowering students in language arts. We know how these students feel. It's the way we feel when we get together with our professional colleagues, who are often positively giddy about teacher research, writing workshop, YA books, genre study, inquiry, and collaboration.

As experienced teachers who are passionate about our profession, we need the university-based professional development that we find at EMU and EMWP, as well as the PD we get from NCTE, MCTE, NWP, nErDcampMI, and EMWP in Lenawee County. The PD we experience in this network is teacher-centered. We know that in this network, our knowledge and expertise will be valued, nourished, and celebrated, and our students will be viewed as people, not potential profit.

Our state may no longer require university-affiliated PD for recertification, but for us it doesn't matter. What

matters to us is that we have access to the highest-quality PD available; our students deserve no less. This is why we will continue to participate in the professional networks we've come to rely on through EMU, EMWP, NWP, NCTE, and MCTE, and why we invite and encourage all our ELA colleagues to do so as well.

Recommended Reading

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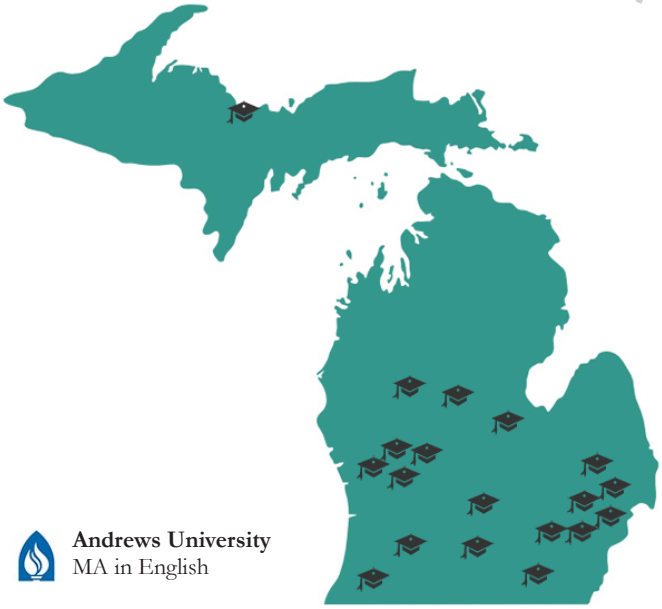
GRADUATE PROGRAMS
IN ENGLISH/EDUCATION



Andrews University
MA in English

Aquinas College
MAT

Calvin College
MEd

Central Michigan University
MA in Reading and Literacy K-12
MA TESOL
MA in English: Language and Literature

Cornerstone University
MA TESOL

Eastern Michigan University
MA in Literature
MA in Children's Literature
MA in English Linguistics
MA in English Studies for Teachers
MA in Reading
MAT, Secondary English Concentration
MA TESOL

Ferris State University
MEd in Curriculum and Instruction,
Reading; Subject Area

Grand Valley State University
MEd in Literacy Studies, Reading/Language Arts
MEd TESOL
MA in Applied Linguistics
MA in English

Madonna University
MAT in Literacy Education
MA TESOL

Marygrove College
MA in English
MEd in Reading
MAT with a focus in Elementary Reading & Literacy, K-6
MA in Literacy Learning

Michigan State University
MA in Literary, Culture, and Film Studies
MA TESOL
MA in Critical Studies in Literacy and Pedagogy
PhD in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education
PhD in English

Oakland University
MA in English
MA in Linguistics
MAT in Reading and Language Arts
PhD in Reading Education

Northern Michigan University
MA in English
MA in Education, Reading K-8
MA in Education, Reading Specialist K-12

Saginaw Valley State University
MAT with specializations in Early Childhood Classroom Teaching,
K-12 Literacy Specialist, and Special Education

Siena Heights University
MA in Elementary Education, Reading K-12
MA in Secondary Education, Reading K-12

Spring Arbor University
MA in Reading
MA TESOL

University of Michigan
PhD in Comparative Literature
PhD in English and Education
PhD in English Language and Literature
PhD in English and Women's Studies
PhD in Linguistics

Wayne State University
MA/PhD in English
MEd in English Education
MAT in English Education
EdD or PhD in English Education
MA in Linguistics
MEd in Reading
EdD in Reading, Language, and Literature

Western Michigan University
MA in English
MA in English with an Emphasis on Teaching
MA in Literacy Studies
PhD in English with an Emphasis in English Education

Data compiled by Sarah Kooienga. Graphic by Robert Rozema.
This list is not comprehensive and may not reflect recent changes in graduate programs across the state.