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Transforming Professional Lives through Online Participation

This article draws from a qualitative study investigating five English teachers' experiences participating online (via blogs, microblogs, and social network sites) in exploration of issues related to teaching, learning, and literacy.

N udged by scholars to make their practice public (Lieberman and Pointer Mace 77) and to "put [themselves] out there" (Hicks and Turner 62) by participating in professional conversations online, many English teachers are turning to the Web to enhance their professional development. Leveraging the affordances of new media technologies, teachers are blogging about their practice, exchanging ideas and resources via Twitter, and engaging others on social network sites to support their classroom instruction. But how does such professionally oriented participation online benefit teachers? What stories do teachers share about participating online to advance their practice? This article builds upon a thread from a qualitative study investigating English teachers' experiences participating online (via blogs, microblogs, and social network sites) in exploration of issues related to teaching, learning, and literacy.

Background

Given the intensification of teacher work in the current climate of public education (Easthope and Easthope 56) and the rise of participatory cultures (Jenkins et al. xi) in the age of new media, the purpose of the study from which this article draws was to begin building an understanding of English teachers' professionally oriented participation online. Specifically, the line of inquiry featured here was guided by the following question: *How do selected secondary English teachers experience professionally oriented participation online?*

I (Luke) began my inquiry by conducting a series of interviews with five English teachers—the coauthors of this article—who, though perhaps at different points on the road from novice to expert, participate online as a means of advancing their professional growth. As I analyzed narratives within the collected interview data, six interrelated themes emerged. Opting to forgo pseudonyms, the five teachers who took part in the study lend their voices in this article to expand on those themes and explain the ways participating online has advanced their development as English teachers.

Finding Relief from a Sense of Isolation

At the start of each school year there is the feel of a new beginning, a great deal of enthusiasm, and a sense of community within most schools. Teachers squeeze into tiny desks and often take part in two or three days of professional development offered by school and district administration. While the year begins with the frenzy of those professional development days, many teachers spend the majority of their time alone in their classrooms. They are busy trying to figure out how to engage students, use time with students effectively, and address the issues students bring to the classroom from their lives beyond the school walls. Even though teachers in a shared building often teach the same students and face similar challenges, there is little evidence that they come together to discuss students' needs and find ways to address them. Actually, a recent Gates Foundation survey found that teachers spend as little as 3 percent of their day in collaboration

with other teachers in the building (Mirel and Goldin).

When I (Meenoo) first started teaching, I was surprised by how little I interacted with other teachers. If I wanted to, I could go whole days without having any meaningful interaction with adults in the building. As a new teacher, I knew I needed the expertise and guidance of experienced teachers, but I wasn't always sure how to reach out and get the support I needed. It was during this time when I first discovered the vibrant and diverse community of teachers on Twitter. Slowly, I learned how to use Twitter to tap into the expertise of teachers near and far. Eventually, I started #engchat, a synchronous Twitter chat session offered weekly, to bring together teachers of English. Since then, the #engchat community has grown in numbers. More importantly, members of the community have remained committed to supporting one another, sharing vibrant ideas for classroom practice and revealing the joys and struggles of teaching. The online community thrives because teachers are able to exchange ideas and ask questions at any time and their responsive peers across the Web provide relevant and resourceful information.

Being part of an online community such as #engchat has given me a chance not only to use innovative ideas with students in my classroom but also to help teachers connect with each other. As I, too, have connected with teachers nationwide, the loneliness and isolation I felt as a new teacher has dissipated because I have found a community that supports me no matter what I might be grappling with in my practice.

Informing Thinking, Shaping Practice

The most important outcomes of my (Gary) participation online are improvements in my classroom instruction, broader understanding of the importance and implications of literacy instruction, and a valuable network of colleagues, many of whom I'm glad to now call friends.

Several years ago, I was feeling a little . . . constrained. The American education system seemed hopelessly mired in No Child Left Behind, and my onsite professional development was not too useful. Because professional development matters to me, I needed something more, and I found it on English

Companion Ning, a social network site developed by Jim Burke. Here was a place I could contribute ideas, ask questions, and help other teachers. I became active on that site, sparking an interest in how online professional development could provide inspiration and information when it was lacking in more immediate contexts.

Particularly inspiring were the book clubs on English Companion Ning that brought authors of books addressing literacy to participate in online discussions. Those discussions led me to new ways of thinking about reading and writing, and they showed me the way to an entirely new set of online colleagues—bright, dedicated educators eager to share their learning, questions, and motivations.

Those online book clubs made me a better teacher of reading and writing by making me aware of important trends in professional literature. Discussing *Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do about It* (Gallagher) and *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child* (Miller) changed my understanding of students' reading lives, and I changed my classroom practices because of that new understanding. Exploring with colleagues *Write beside Them: Risk, Voice, and Clarity in High School Writing* (Kittle) and *The Socially Networked Classroom: Teaching in the New Media Age* (Kist) pro-

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vided insights into how my writing instruction could better meet the evolving needs of young writers. The discussions of *What's the Big Idea? Question-Driven Units to Motivate Reading, Writing, and Thinking* (Burke) and *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment* (Wilson) led me to big-picture realizations about how literacy instruction can and should function in various settings. I'm a better teacher because I read those books and participated in those discussions. Those discussions are archived online, and I have consulted them numerous times since their official activity ended.

Maybe even more importantly, I began to publicly exchange ideas with the authors of those books and other discussion participants. Those exchanges spawned a powerful network of colleagues that would not have been possible without social

media. My online exchanges now connect me with educators from around the world on a daily basis and place me in the stream of good ideas flowing in all directions every day through various social media platforms.

Along with a few of those first English Companion Ning members, I helped organize and host a "webstitute" series seeking to create an online conference that duplicated the best aspects of a face-to-face conference. We brought together subject matter experts, excellent classroom practitioners, and hundreds of educators interested in professional growth. The webstitute team learned a lot from those experiences, and each of us has gone on to lead other professional development experiences, sometimes with each other and sometimes with other colleagues.

Eventually, online professional development led me to launch my own blog: What's Not Wrong? I use that site to reflect on professional and personal experiences, review books, and process my observations about literacy trends and education in general. Being a blogger means I also have the goal of commenting at least once each day on someone else's blog.

All of these social media adventures have made me a better classroom teacher, a stronger writer, and, hopefully, a more valuable contributor to our profession.

Establishing Networks of Support

Like Gary and so many of my colleagues, I (Cindy) turned to the Web to learn with and from others about how to be a better teacher. Going into my interactions on English Companion Ning, Twitter, and blogs with those goals in mind almost guaranteed that my practice would change. But even change that is desired can be intimidating.

A thousand questions would whir through my mind whenever I introduced something new into Room 216. A couple of years ago, I made a decision after much reading, thought, and nervous consideration that I wanted to drop the traditionally expected homework from my class. I had countless reasons why I didn't want to assign worksheets or require the usual answer-these-questions-after-your-reading assignments. Instead I told students that I wanted them to spend 20 minutes a night (on

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average) reading whatever they chose to read that wasn't assigned for another class. I suggested newspapers and magazines online, titles they could borrow from the library for their e-readers, and books they could take from my classroom library. I knew we had been talking about more accountability for students at school and I knew what I was deciding to do would not be popular. Thus, I worried: *What if it won't work? What do I say to back up my reasons? How do I explain it to the various stakeholders of my classroom?*

When I found myself starting to question—or others starting to question—what I was doing in the classroom, I realized that I had found something in my personal learning network (PLN) that was every bit as valuable as the collaborative learning I was engaged in with the members of my PLN; I realized that I had created an incredible support system.

My peers online were talking about, trying, or actually making the same changes in their classrooms—everything from eliminating traditional homework to using independent free-choice reading in the high school classroom to bringing the outside world into the classroom with technology—that I was setting out to make in my classroom. Chances are that one of them had run up against similar concerns and could help me think them through.

Like Meenoo, I don't feel alone in my classroom anymore. I have a whole crew of cheerleaders who are easy to reach with a quick message between classes. When my practice has been questioned (like when I was asked why I'm not assigning more grammar worksheets for homework or why I have to have "all those books" in the back of my classroom), I have had no problem finding any number of knowledgeable colleagues online to help me keep calm and organize my thinking and my resources to answer my challengers.

The experience has not been one-sided; I have done my part to pay that kindness and encouragement back to my peers online and to pay it forward to a new group of teachers who have become part of the networks in which I participate. I have helped teachers navigate the waters of blogging and organized Twitter chats. I have encouraged those with a love of books and a story to share to post at Nerdy Book Club, the online home of a tribe of readers who share their love of children's and young adult literature. I have given many the encouragement to put their ideas into practice—in their classrooms and online.

This is an exciting time to be an English teacher—but I couldn't imagine doing what I do inside the classroom as a teacher or outside my school as an active participant in my own online professional development without the encouragement and support of the colleagues online who contribute to my PLN.

Positioning Oneself as a Writer

Positioning myself (Brian) as a writer transformed the chemistry of my teaching. My habits changed. For years, I marked errors. I scrutinized writing through state rubrics. When I was conferencing with students, grammar and punctuation ruled. I focused on the writing, not the writer—while never writing myself. Changing my teaching habits meant changing one behavior five years ago. I began writing.

Today, as a writer, I engage in struggles that are fresh and real. I no longer speak to students as a judge; I speak as a writer. Currently, I write a professional blog, a podcast found on iTunes, a YA novel in progress, and every essay my students write.

Only two episodes into podcasting, the experience is challenging me to consider the nuance of writing for the spoken voice. It forces me to listen. Linguist and researcher Wallace Chafe shared, "Good writers, whether or not they realize it, *listen to what they write.* They listen while they are writing, and even more importantly they listen while they are reading what they wrote in order to make changes" (10–11; italics in original). Never before had I considered prosody, or writing the musicality of the spoken voice. Now, punctuation comes to life as does the art of intonation, pausing, and pace. I revise often, on paper and through speech, before settling on what I need from my written text.

The mentors shaping my writing for podcasting are Nate DiMeo from *The Memory Palace,* Ira Glass from *This American Life,* and Stephen Tobolowsky from *The Tobolowsky Files.* Considering *The Memory Palace,* DiMeo's words would read well on paper, but his delivery is rich and patient because he owns his words. He is an artist. Glass, on the other hand, is the quintessential conversationalist; his experience and confidence makes me comfortable hearing his stories. Listen to *This American Life* and step into his living room. In addition to possessing the best qualities of the other two, Tobolowsky knows his material. He believes in it. He speaks from his blood and bones.

For 15 years, I never taught those connections: knowing material, owning words, and discovering confidence. I never taught listening to what one wrote. Students never saw me write. How could I understand the experiences of student writers when I wasn't writing? How could I have ever helped a writer? We never connected. We never truly talked.

Podcasting, in addition to blogging, invites writers to speak for themselves while inviting connections with others (Hicks 95–100). Recently, a student, Eva, responded to a blog post I wrote about losing my dog to cancer:

> While reading I laughed, and then I cried. I couldn't even finish one part I was crying so hard. So here we are, reading Mr. Kelley's blog post in the middle of [the road], crying so hard my mom had to take both hands off the wheel for a sec so she could wipe away the tears. It was so moving. And while I was reading about Dublin I really grew to love him. Actually I'm tearing up thinking about it.

Because I write, students are eager to talk about writing, not a grade. They see my value as a thinker and mentor. More students take an interest in my struggles as a writer and as a person. They honor my advice and guidance. Some say they want to write like me. Repeatedly, many used words such as *encouragement* and *comfortable* when asked how my being a writer *beside them* has helped them.

Writing in public, online and in front of students, makes me face my habits and who I choose to be as a teacher. I choose to be a mentor, not a judge; I choose to share my failures and my successes; and, above all, I choose to share my humanity.

Generating New Professional Opportunities

I (Sarah) never thought I'd jump on the Twitter bandwagon, but after completing a technology-focused professional development program offered by my former school district I found myself slowly climbing aboard. Once I started dabbling in conversations and following exchanges between teachers online, I was hooked. Finding organized chat sessions such as #engchat and #titletalk introduced me to new teaching ideas, new friends, and ultimately new professional development opportunities.

Before I started using Twitter I had already started my blog, a young adult literature review/teaching blog. My Twitter use paralleled my blog use as I started sharing hyperlinks to my blog posts and connecting with other bloggers, many of whom are teachers. For example, I met Jillian Heise, a teacher and blogger in Wisconsin. As we discussed teaching, reading, blogging, and more online, we became fast friends. Jillian and I met in person at the 2011 NCTE Annual Convention in Chicago. We spent much of our time there together, attending the same sessions and reporting back to one another when the sessions we attended varied.

Attending an NCTE Annual Convention together and discussing personal teaching stories online led us to propose our own NCTE session

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in 2012. We invited other educators we met online, Mindi Rench, a literacy coach in Illinois, and Danielle Kulawiak, a teacher in New Jersey, to collaborate with us on the proposal and develop a well-rounded session. Our proposal, "Facilitating Choice within Curriculum Constraints," was accepted. We had a great turnout, and the experience left us with a new sense of confidence, particularly because many attendees wanted to continue the conversation we started in our session.

The success of our session in 2012 was the push Jillian and I needed to propose a session for NCTE 2013. Having forged relationships with authors and publishers through interactions on Twitter and our blogs, we created a session about tapping into published authors' experiences with revision to improve student writing. Given the success of my initial online collaborations, I also developed a session for NCTE 2013 with Jennifer Fountain, a teacher from Texas I met online. We have long been sharing teaching ideas and experiences with one another online, so we were thrilled to collaborate on a session about young adult literature.

Just as I didn't envision embracing Twitter, early in my career I didn't see myself sharing my work publicly on a national stage. I don't know if I would have considered presenting at a national convention without the confidence that came from connecting with so many like-minded teachers online. I certainly never expected to present at a national convention with teachers from other states, each of whom I befriended through Twitter.

In the last few years I've become a literacy leader on the Web and at NCTE. Online, I write about my practice via Twitter and my blog, primarily engaging other teachers in the exploration of matters related to teaching young adult literature and promoting reading among adolescents. At NCTE, I share ideas and experiences alongside the colleagues who push my thinking in online arenas. These experiences have helped me learn that my voice as an educator is an important one. I regularly receive emails from teachers seeking advice about young adult literature, including the novels I recommend adding to existing curricula and the titles that make for compelling read-alouds in high school classrooms. I've always been a reflective and passionate teacher; my

experience online has pushed that to an entirely different level.

Enhancing the Capacity to Support Students

Regardless of one's experience or expertise, there are limits to the depth and breadth of one's knowledge. Henry Jenkins argued that "[n]one of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills" (4). Putting together the pieces as Jenkins described has enhanced our capacity to support students. When students have sought book recommendations and their preferred genres fell beyond our expertise, we have crowd-sourced recommendations from colleagues at a distance whose knowledge about those genres exceeded our own. When reflecting on units we designed, we've invited feedback from our peers online in preparation for redesigning future iterations of those units. These are rather general examples, but we hope the point is clear: We have progressed on our respective journeys from novice to expert by drawing on the collective knowledge of a diverse set of teachers, scholars, and authors online and students in our classrooms have been better served as a result.

Conclusion

Making practice public, opening the door for an online audience—and opening oneself to criticism in the process—may seem like a daunting notion to many experienced teachers. Already feeling the weight of judgment from administrators, legislators, and the public, some may ask, "Why should I invite more scrutiny?" Likewise, many prospective and early-career teachers, having received warnings from teacher educators about the dangers of public profiles and the permanence of online content, may be reluctant to explore teaching, learning, and

literacy on the Web. However, we firmly believe that the rewards far outweigh the risks. As we have described here, teachers, regardless of where they find themselves on the long and winding road from novice to expert, have much to gain from putting themselves out there and engaging responsibly in professionally oriented participation online. **EJ**

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Twitter can also be used in the classroom to get students talking and to think of literature response and writing in a different way. Here are a few examples from ReadWriteThink.org:

> Using Microblogging and Social Networking to Explore Characterization and Style: Students use social networking sites to trace the development of characters by assuming the persona of a character on the class Ning and sending a set number of tweets, or status updates. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/using-microblogging-social-networking-1171.html

> A Tale of a Few Text Messages: A Character Study of *A Tale of Two Cities:* Students use *A Tale of Two Cities* to explore relationships, plot points, character traits, and background by writing text messages between characters within the novel. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/tale-text-messages-character-30837.html

> Texting a Response to *Lord of the Flies*: Students use *Lord of the Flies* to explore communication styles and techniques by writing text messages from one of the novel's characters to an imagined audience off the island. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/texting-response-lord-flies-1174.html

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Shouldering Sandy Hook (P.T. 12.17)

On Monday after the shootings,
I flip on the lights in my classroom
and force myself not to rearrange
file cabinets as flimsy barricades.
For today, those who question my
commitment to children pause.
They will be back. I'm just a teacher.
I must be broken and reformed
to meet the demands of this era.

The Common Core says nothing
about how to teach reverence in a
time of destruction. They've created
a puzzle of our discipline: literacy skills,
all border pieces and no centers.
And sure, it's important for students
to make a claim and back up their ideas
with strong and relevant details.

But there is no evidence, no
reasoning to support Maddie,
who cannot stop imagining her
six-year-old brother trapped in cupboards;
Jackson, whose normal kidding would be
tasteless, frightened by his own numb silence;
Karen, who circle-talks about God because
she doesn't know she's dipping a toe
into questioning her only belief.

No, there is no nonfiction text to
navigate this one, so we turn to poetry:
Bob Hicok and Naomi Shihab Nye.
We borrow words and copy them
in our journals and share and cry.
We have no purpose for our writing.
Today, there is no "I CAN" statement
Other than: Be human together.

—Brenna Griffin
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