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Writing Spaces, Professional Places: how a teachers' writing group can nurture teaching identities

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ABSTRACT The National Writing Project (NWP) aims to promote writing groups for teachers to inform practice and raise the understanding of writing and learning to write. Writing Teachers groups do more than support teachers of writing. They can be characterised as communities of practice and as such may provide a space where teachers may construct professional knowledge and establish teaching identities in mutually supportive ways. This article focuses, in particular, on how this may have worked for one NQT (newly qualified teacher).

I began teaching in the 1970s. I was idealistic, filled with optimism and deeply ignorant, particularly of the lives of those I would teach. In my first post, at Dartington School, I learned a way of being. I learned from children and adults and from the long-established practices of the school and wider community. In my third year of teaching I joined the staff of Countesthorpe College in Leicestershire, where I was impelled to engage with the nature of teaching in ways I could not have imagined. Countesthorpe was a maintained democratic school where students shaped their own timetables and their own studies (Watts, 1977). At both Dartington and Countesthorpe, students told you what they thought in no uncertain terms, and at Countesthorpe, face to face with individual students, we had really to engage with what Lawrence Stenhouse termed the *art* of teaching. Countesthorpe was a new school and a new vision. Here, my early notions of what it means to be a teacher were put to the test. However, for me, this was an easy route. In a more conventional school, I feared that the institution would overpower my unformed notions and I would lose the thread of what I thought I might become. In those first two schools I found communities which challenged and supported me as I began to get to grips with the complexities of teaching. Now, I work with student teachers. They are

full of energy and vision, and strongly committed to the young children they will teach. How do they, how will they, find the spaces that allow them to discover more surely their teaching selves and the capacity to change and grow with the changing lives of children?

Developing a Community of Practice

At Countesthorpe, as a crucial accompaniment to our everyday encounters with students and students' lives, there was endless conversation. Those of us who worked in teams, knowing the same students, talked about the events of the day, about the projects and ideas of individuals and about our own part in those. Then there was the drift to the coffee bar where there might be a cheese cob or a Mars bar and then more talk with colleagues. I remember with gratitude the generosity of more experienced teachers, Michael Armstrong significant amongst them, who were willing to talk about what happened daily in our classrooms and the ways in which we could come to more fully understand what we and the students were doing (Armstrong, 1980). Michael established a monthly meeting of teachers to discuss children's work. The group included teachers from every phase: from the reception class to those of us who taught A level. Each month one of us would bring the work of a pupil to the meeting and present it for discussion. These meetings had a profound effect upon my practice. Reception class teachers, especially, made me see things differently. I was prompted to keep a teaching journal, where I learned the contribution writing would make to my understandings. The monthly meeting offered a space where teachers with different kinds and degrees of experience could develop a community of practice.

It was not until I began thinking about communities of practice and the part they can play in the way teachers develop that I began to consider those early experiences and the impact that professional conversations have: on our capacity to keep children at the forefront of our teaching; and on our personal and professional well-being in a tested and contested educational world. In the School of Education at the University of East Anglia (UEA) we have been running writing workshops for teachers and for student teachers since the year 2000. In 2009 the teachers' workshop was one of two founding groups comprising part of the UK NWP (National Writing Project), formed in emulation of the US NWP with the intention of strengthening the teaching of writing in schools in the face of acronyms, protocols, tricks and tips, and a curiously quantitative approach to assessment. The precept upon which these workshops are based is that just as most art teachers have a practice, so those who teach writing should write. That, crudely, is a good start. In the process of writing, reading, and responding to each other's writing teachers gain a much deeper sense of the processes of writing, engaging both intellectually and emotionally with its pleasures and challenge. Invariably, teachers' first response, after the immediate sense of pleasure, is to reflect on the often unreasonable demands they make upon young writers. Finding just how many words have

been written after twenty minutes, how nervous you feel about reading work aloud, how the mind goes blank when presented with certain writing challenges – all of this grounds our thinking.

Teachers' writing groups go well beyond that first acknowledgement of the gap between our own writing practices and our expectations of those we teach. They create spaces for our own writing where we are able to acknowledge ourselves as writers and find increasing pleasure in doing so. Even after a long day teaching and a journey to the university, many members of the group remark on the exhilaration and sense of well-being that come as a result of being there and taking part. There is something in the mix that empowers and restores and which has something to do with the nature of writing. Writing can be a powerfully democratic activity that is linked to one's sense of self. That alone brings a sense of release. There is much, also, to do with the nature of the community. Three key factors, for me, are: the deepening understanding of what it means to write, emotionally and intellectually; the community of practice; and the way that these two combine to shape and inform the way teaching identities are realised.

The teachers' writing group at UEA has grown from its beginnings among students who followed the Primary PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) course. It has expanded through wider publicity and word of mouth to include teachers from secondary schools, including sixth-form colleges. Often three or four university tutors also attend. The group is a shifting population, subject to the demands of school and home. This year the meetings are rarely less than fifteen or sixteen strong and include a good number of newly qualified teachers (NQTs). Last year we were joined by two NQTs who had graduated from the Primary PGCE course. Neither had been part of the writing group during their PGCE year, but both enrolled on the MA course linked to the Writing Teachers group. At the end of the year they each submitted a portfolio of their own writing and writing from children in their classes. For this article I am able to draw on the work of Rebecca Griffiths, who focused on writing during her NQT year. She is a reception class teacher in a large primary school serving a rural town, and although she maintains that she is 'not a writer', she has, since childhood, loved writing. Her presence in the group, and that of her colleague and friend, prompted me to think about the ways in which teachers are able to develop their teaching identities in the current climate. The nature of the community of writing teachers which they joined is an important part of this story.

Everyone Writes, Everyone Shares

Communities of writers, learners, teachers; communities of practice; these are all phrases easily connected with Writing Teachers groups. As I have thought about the teachers who attend the UEA group and the reasons why they attend, it seems to me a very serious term which perhaps underpins all that happens in such groups and draws attention to a living space, a group of individuals who

have a powerful influence on each other's practice. For the moment I shall use Lave and Wenger's definition:

> A community of practice is a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice. A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretative support necessary for making sense of its heritage. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98)

The composition of the group seems important to me. This disparate group with teaching and writing in common brings a rich mix of attitudes, experience and perceptions to the table. The most important task for those of us who run the group is to create a space where conversations happen. The new teacher, who begins at the periphery, becomes one of a community. This is not an apprenticeship model but one where, through participation in the group, 'in conversation with multiple others, individuals come to know themselves and others, to know what they know and to construct professional identities' (Larson & Marsh, 2005). A crucial aspect of the conversation is that it arises from shared activity. Everyone writes. Everyone shares at least some of their writing. Everyone brings, without compulsion, children's works and news of teaching and learning to share with the group.

Group meetings last no more than two hours. They are at the end of the school day and start slowly as people arrive from across a rural area, some driving fifty miles to be there. The slow start, the break for tea and good biscuits, the chance to linger at the end of the evening, these frame a literacy practice that opens up spaces and allows connections to be made. The session begins with quick writing activities that move into longer periods of writing and time to read aloud and respond to each other. We begin to talk about our writing and each other's writing and inevitably move into talking about teaching and about children's writing. Teachers bring children's work and resources they have made, ideas they have used, challenges they have faced. At these times, the teacher, the child and the nature of writing are brought together in ways that seem to create professional knowledge. Each individual makes of it what they will in relation to their own teaching context. The community helps to both shape ideas and provide the basis for personal and professional confidence. Rebecca Griffiths characterises herself in three different writing roles: as Miss Griffiths, the teacher; as Rebecca, who writes lists to organise her life and long letters and emails to maintain contact with family; and as a member of the Writing Teachers group. The writing demanded of her as a teacher is comfortable in its indication of boundaries and direct purpose, in comparison with the freedom and potential danger of the writing group where her sense of herself as a writer in relation to others has felt challenging. She clearly is a person who writes and who loves writing. Here is the reason behind her assertion that she is not a writer.

> I found the activities we did at the writing group inspiring, but challenging. Each session revealed more about myself as a thinker and a user of words, which I suppose is what makes me a writer. I found it surprising how difficult I found it to express my thoughts on paper, especially for someone who is usually so competently vocal within a group. It seemed once the words materialised on paper, they began to resonate seriously, becoming more of a permanent statement. When writing and sharing the outcome, I have found it strangely intrusive as I have felt it reveals an honest insight into the workings of the mind. (Rebecca Griffiths, August 2013)

When Rebecca was studying for her degree in visual studies, she enjoyed the processes of combining words and visual images, including 'text around imagery, layering words or sentences that are not premeditated ... I think the association between text and imagery I have now must be influenced by the way I included text in my drawings as a child.' Rebecca works with children in the very early stages of literacy. She is already interested in and predisposed to writing that may not look like writing and to the combining of words and images. What a good disposition for a reception teacher! At the first meeting Rebecca attended we worked with the Changing Landscapes exhibition on show in the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts (on UEA's campus) at that time. Beginning with words to do with landscape, and drawing on work in the exhibition which was both evocative and provocative, we made 3D landscapes from white paper, writing around them and in the shadows cast by the lights in the gallery at night. It was an idea that suited Rebecca's practice and she immediately translated this into the classroom, where children made sets and props for story telling and re-telling. She says that her observations of the children at this time made her immediately see the links between her practice and theirs, and she was able to notice the children for whom, though they may not have been the most competent writers at that time, these visual cues prompted stories rich in content.

Skill and a Vision: writing independently with purpose and for pleasure

Almost immediately, Rebecca made the connection between these other modes of expression and writing. She saw the importance of prompting and encouraging what she calls 'writing before it is written', a preoccupation that threads throughout her work. However, this was not something she was ready to share until later in the year. In the meantime she pursued her instinct to provide a richly visual environment where the role-play areas became the site of pleasurable language both oral and written. She chose to pause and to reflect on herself as a writer in February of 2013. She has made time to observe children in the role-play area and act on the hints their play gives her about their interests and curiosity. She found herself enjoying the act of scribing for

children, allowing herself the time to reflect on what is being written during this slower process of composition. Although she judged her writing no better than at the start of the year, she wrote that her confidence had soared. She sees the sources of the confidence to be manifold, certainly including the demands of her job and its expectations, but also the Writing Teachers group, and the demands of an MA course involving not only writing about what she was doing but also reading the work of others.

Two more things happened in February, both prompted by the conversations at the Writing Teachers meetings. The first was an attempt to articulate all the many ways in which Rebecca saw herself as encouraging a language-rich environment. 'Why do we write in reception?' she asked, and found her answers in the displays around her classroom. This move to consider and then make visible the purposes of writing was, according to Rebecca, a direct result of the conversations with others at Writing Teachers. The community of writers prompted her to share the reasons for what she did and what the children did with both the children and other adults. Rebecca's conception of what counts as writing includes far more than the marks on the page. In her view we write to consolidate our learning; we design sets for stories and create characters to visually tell our own stories; we write lists of words to help us when writing poems and stories; we write because we have ideas we would like to share with others; we list things that we find; we write to communicate with others ... There are more such statements, and I hope that you can imagine the compelling visual environment full of colour, images and words that is Rebecca's classroom.

At the same time, teachers in the group were talking about the opportunities that children do or do not have to write independently things of their own choosing, and how often that independent writing is so much livelier and more adventurous, longer even, than usual classroom offerings. Rebecca had the very good idea of giving children independent writing books at a parents' evening so she was able to explain to parents just what the book was for and how it could be used both at home and at school. Only one week later, she received back books containing two and three pieces of writing. She observed that the children were writing purposefully and pleasurably, and she was also able to recognise just how far they had come since the beginning of the year. 'Not only did they write independently, but with purpose and for pleasure. The formality of writing to develop an individual skill had been replaced with a love for writing that incorporated the technical skills I had taught them.' Achieving that balance in these early years of school demands skill and a vision of how it might happen.

Children clearly feel able to write freely in Rebecca's classroom. They write about dinosaurs and fairies, pirates and favourite shoes, families and robbers. And they are inventive. When one child asked, 'Can I make a really big story?' Rebecca said, 'Yes, but we don't have any big paper.' The story emerged on three sheets of paper arranged in a pyramid to tell the story: 'A little princess and a bune rabbit. They got on a poney and they got to the krsl.' The

characters are set out on two foundation sheets and the third sheet shows the triumphant end of their journey, the three-towered castle on top of a round green hill. Here the narrative is captured in words, images and the physical arrangement of paper.

Towards the end of the year, not only have the children become more confident, but the nature of Rebecca's practice is also more assuredly executed. This is particularly true of her capacity to take 'The Small Dragon' by Brian Patten, a poem that I had used as a frame to prompt writing, and translate it into an outdoor adventure with role play, a hidden dragon, the making of nests and a collaborative poem. In replicating their poem I wish I could convey the energy of the children's involvement in the whole activity:

> I found a small dragon here in the dry mud, under the rustling leaves.
> I think it must have come from a carnival or somewhere far away.
> Because the material looks colourful and bright.
> I fed it on many things, big sticks, grey sparkly rocks, soft fluffy feathers
> But it wanted meat from another dragon.
> It made a nest underneath a big, loud, rumbling volcano.
> I decided to keep the beautiful dragon a secret!

Towards the end of the year in a Writing Teachers session where we made characters and maps, choosing from a collection of given events, to create a landscape and a journey. In the group, adults created all kinds of landscapes and interpreted the traditional story elements in ways that suited us. We drew our characters to begin with and saw how they could be moved around the landscape of the map. One of the other early years teachers introduced the characters and map-making activity to her five-year-olds. She returned to the next meeting full of the success of these maps which became story mats that were played with and added to repeatedly. They took on a life of their own as a focus for play and for story telling. The teacher was bright with the pleasure of it and Rebecca, her friend, was able to talk about what happened and take the idea to use in different ways in her own classroom. The use of maps, drawn characters and story props began to feature strongly in both teachers' classrooms and they were able to exchange ideas and observations. That close relationship between teachers working with a similar age group is very powerful in terms of developing practice, and it is enriched within the context of many other practitioners.

The Writing Teachers group builds and rebuilds a shared repertoire of stories, styles, artefacts and tools. The members construct together the conceptual frameworks that inform their practice and they take strength from the group in a world where many adults say crazy things about how young children learn and what should be expected of teachers. They offer one space where teachers can pause and have the space and mutual encouragement to define who they are and what they do.

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Information about the NATE National Writing Project can be found at www.nwp.org.uk