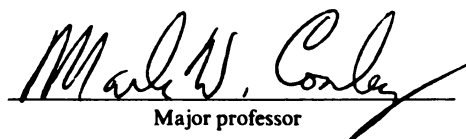




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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH
EMPOWERED COLLABORATION**

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**TEACHERS WRITING CLUB:
Professional Development Through Empowered Collaboration**

By

Robert Lynn Smith

A DISSERTATION

**Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Teacher Education

1996

ABSTRACT

TEACHERS WRITING CLUB:

Professional Development Through Empowered Collaboration

By

Robert Lynn Smith

The purpose of this study was to describe what happens when teachers in mid-career stages form a collaborative culture, or club, to write about their practices. The study bridged consideration of teachers' literacy with consideration of career stage-appropriate professional development. Rorty's concept of *normal discourse* was used as a starting point to argue that professionals need to confer. The teachers met eight times as a club to talk about educational ideas and critique each others' written work. The research goal was to determine to what extent teacher collaboration aimed at achieving professional publication would help individuals grow professionally.

An ethnographic methodology was used to participate in and observe the meetings of the group of five secondary teachers who represented a variety of disciplines from a single high school. Data included extensive fieldnotes and diary entries, audiotapes, interviews, a structured conversation, and documents. Domain analyses were kept on the transcribed audiotapes of club sessions. These domain analyses were combined into componential analyses to seek themes. Charts were produced to sketch the participants' career trajectories. During the structured conversation, participants generated themes based on reflexive conversations the club conducted at three-month intervals. Club members also checked the data and offered alternative interpretations.

Using principles of effective professional development from the literature as an evaluative framework, the author argues that the teachers club evolved into an effective community for facilitating learning. From the participants' perspective, the writing club assisted most with idea formation and refinement. However, the study revealed that the career-stage model may be missing critical components—such as a stage called “empowered collaboration”—and is inadequate to reflect teachers' complex development. Themes which emerged from the study represented two domains—the pragmatic and emotional domains. Pragmatic issues included how the review process should be controlled so as to protect and aid authors. Emotional ramifications were seen to be interwoven in most of the pragmatic club matters and in a crucial theme the teachers called “trust.” In the final analysis, teachers are well situated to describe their own growth and work; collaboratively-controlled writing clubs are structures which allow them to successfully do so.

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1996

For Marlene L. Smith, 1997-98 President of the Michigan Reading Association

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PREFACE

Should writing teachers write? As recently as January 1996, this familiar question was being debated by teachers who comprise the Michigan State University Red Cedar Writing Project. As usual, the question was being weighed through a written mode, in this case via electronic mail. Someone wrote, "Should swimming teachers swim?" Of course they should, I thought, just like driving teachers should drive. And, since having driven back in 1955 does not make someone knowledgeable of driving conditions of 1996, it seems important that someone who teaches drivers' education have experienced *recent* conditions. Written communication styles change with the generations just as driving laws and conditions do. The main argument against teachers writing is generally that teachers are too busy to write and their schedules do not allow opportunities for them to write. Yet, what other professions have a schedule that allows three months of break from the routine? It can be argued that teachers generally have more time to write than any other professionals. The fact remains that most teachers do not write and are not looking for opportunities to publish their ideas.

What is there about the activity of writing that deters teachers? It is hard work. Although teachers may remember writing as a burden in college, yet teachers probably achieved more success with writing than many other students did, so many may recall positive feelings as well. At their place of employment, some teachers feel that writing is frequently used against them. They receive annual written evaluations from their principal—which can be traumatic—yet are seldom asked to evaluate their superiors on paper. Like other workers, teachers are "written up" by their bosses when they break the rules. Members of the

general public, too, have taken to writing critical analyses for the editorial pages of what they think is or is not happening in classrooms.

Despite—or perhaps in response to—all of these factors, many teachers feel that it is important that educators write down their ideas about the profession and then publish or disseminate those ideas. The Red Cedar Writing Project previously mentioned is comprised of teachers who value writing and meet whenever possible to foster each other's written expressions. This dissertation is about teachers who are interested in using writing to (1) develop their skills as teachers and (2) advance their profession through recording histories of what has been thought about, piloted and adopted in the changing context of the classroom.

In 1976 Gail Sheehy published a book about the adult life stages which influenced many people's thinking about human development. *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* sought to help adults understand their own existences by sketching patterns seen across many lives and common crises that people face. Sheehy, who calls herself a protege of anthropologist Margaret Mead, understands life cycles to be a function of cultural mores. Since the culture of the United States has changed dramatically since 1976, it follows that life stages have also evolved. Biologically, for example, 55-year-old women could not have egg donor babies in 1976 but now can; and 70-year-old people now reverse aging by using hormones. Consequently, in 1995 Sheehy published *New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time*. As an older researcher, Sheehy believes that some of what she described in 1976 is no longer accurate: "The second half of adult life is *not* the stagnant, depressing, downward slide we had always assumed it to be (p. xii). What is more, in a radical departure from *Passages*, her latest book asserts that "There is no longer a standard life cycle. People are increasingly able to customize their life cycles" (p. 16). Sheehy's evolving views on stage theories are instructive, and since they are largely based

on interview and survey data, they represent a broad societal change of attitude about developmental stages. Because I used career-stage theories to help me understand the development that teacher-writers would enjoy, the insiders in my study proved to be connected with these changing American attitudes. It was important for me to pay close attention to the views of the participants which differed from my own views.

A researcher who both participates in and studies a writing club he initiated himself is apt to be accused of undue and maybe even rampantly subjective influence on the other participants' views. People who know my quiet ways and respect for teachers tell me that I am a university-based researcher who is well suited to participate in K-12 professional development activities without dominating or playing the expert. Rather than doing a lot of informing, I work at helping teachers develop *their* voices... including their written projections of self. The teachers I worked with in the club are wonderfully assertive (as well as good listeners) even when they are not around someone as quiet as me. Nevertheless, despite the mix of my conscious avoidance of dominance and the teachers' assertiveness, the outcomes described in this paper were of course in part created because of my words and actions within the teachers' writing club. Well aware of that, I enjoy attempting to apply a new type of research that has been making headway within education for 30 years now (Conley, 1992; Lather, 1991). In the brand of research known as *action research*, teachers are making inquiries into their own practices. They are pursuing the studies in their own classrooms or schools and, of course, do not set aside their goals of positively influencing their students whenever possible.

For instance, teachers who pose the question "How do students best come to understand the concept of democracy?" are not willing to totally remove their influence over any of the students in order to best answer that question. As teachers, including teachers of adults and staff developers, we must use our

endowed offices to cause or inspire learning. Consequently, teacher-researchers will affect their data even as they struggle to find ways to collect and interpret it. Since the ultimate goal of the teacher-researcher is to learn how to positively influence the participants, worrying about influencing the participants seems futile: it is only important that we pay close attention to what we, as researchers do, and what we, as participants do (Erickson, 1986; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983/1990). If knowledge is constructed and contested through multi-voiced or polyphonic interactions, then is it not possible to alternately use a researcher's voice and a participant's voice? In this work, I assumed that it was not only possible but also a legitimate and meaningful way to proceed.

This dual involvement is in some ways more difficult, for we must attend to so much at once. Yet, in many senses we are accustomed to simultaneously projecting multiple selves. At a family gathering, for instance, a person is able to participate as a father and son simultaneously, as well as a brother, spouse, uncle and so on. Even though these selves may interfere with one another in some ways, people are accustomed to expecting such conflicts and finding ways to handle the complexities of these social situations. To do so, we speak multiple discourses, reflect, remember and explore ideas; and we do so without field notes, tape recorders, or computers. Over time, people effect change within their families by living their multiple roles as best they can. Similarly, within our jobs, we enact multiple selves and learn to transition smoothly from self to self appropriately.

If we teacher-researchers establish rigorous inquiry systems, allow ourselves plenty of time to attend to the activities we establish and to check the data we collect, it is possible to construct new ways of approaching the educational issues we identify. The dual involvement of participant-observer is in some ways easier, too. As a participant-observer we have more empathy for what the other participants are going through as we blur the outsider/insider distinction. As an example of one benefit of this approach, my field notes and transcripts remind me

about the first time that my writing was reviewed by the club members. I asked the group to write remarks on my draft and I waited and watched as they went about the work. Every minute seemed like ten as I wondered what they were writing and how they were reacting to my paragraphs. Having written many compositions and having known these teachers for three years or more, I was surprised by my own anxiety. Later on, this anxious participation helped me understand the vulnerability teachers feel as they write for peers.

The whole point of research such as this—whether it involves students, ourselves, or other teachers—is to influence the participants (Lather, 1991). But the influence is not merely for the purpose of saying “I told you it would work and here’s proof that it did;” instead such research is motivated by a sincere wanting to see a significant change in some aspect of practice or some kind of freeing of the practitioners or broadening of their capabilities. Even after realizing that for few observed changes can we claim a causative link, we nevertheless engage in action research in order to participate in an activity that may someday allow us to witness—regardless of the cause—a desired dawning. So, I admit up front a goal of seeing all teachers (not just writing teachers) write and publish quality descriptions of their practices which will serve the purpose of improving teaching and learning by increasing communication about the difficulties and delights of the profession. Such legacies will benefit other teachers, I believe, by helping them (1) enter the profession, (2) know what career stages or patterns to expect throughout their years, and (3) stay in the classroom as productive forces. Here then is my bias in favor of teachers’ published communication applied to a research project intended to reform all the while it inquires.

RLS

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Chapter One

A Teacher's Identity as Writer

The “mute inglorious Miltons” are more numerous than one might suppose, particularly in an age in which even an articulate Milton might go unnoticed, certainly unrewarded. Most of us have potentialities that have never been developed simply because the circumstances of our lives never called them forth.

John Gardner

We believe that almost all persons can write and want to write; that not writing or not wanting to write is unnatural; that if either occurs, something major has been subverted in a mind, in a life; that as teachers and researchers we must try to help make writing natural again, and necessary. *Credo, credemus*. And so may we continue together.

Janet Emig

Introduction

This qualitative dissertation grows out of the work that I have been doing for the past three years and from interests that emerged long before that. I have been interested in writing since the age of 15 and have worked as a writer in a variety of capacities including that of part-time journalist. During more than ten years as an English and reading teacher, however, I did comparatively little writing. I spent many, many hours writing comments on the papers I assigned students to write (which was often personally rewarding), but my own writing was limited to journals, songs, and personal letters. I not only had little energy for writing articles which would be disseminated to colleagues, I also had little confidence that what I knew was worthy of distribution. Like most other teachers, I assumed that abstract knowledge and quantitative data—derived from large anonymous samples—were what mattered when writing about education (Hollingsworth,

1994). The constraints of time, lack of models, and others' and my own lack of expectations rendered me voiceless. In other words, though I knew how to write in a technical sense, I did not know what writing might have meant for my practice, and I certainly did not believe myself authorized to publish.

My writing habits gradually changed during the five years after I left the classroom to work on assessment programs for the State Department of Education. Not as a civil servant but through my own initiative, I negotiated five annual contracts with MDE. I regarded myself as a representative of students and teachers within the bureaucracy of state government. Suddenly I was privy to things that other educators needed to know—i.e., how evolving policies would be affecting students' and teachers' lives. Looking back, I regard this “empowerment” of my voice to be unfortunate and in some ways artificial; I would prefer to have gained a voice by writing about my classroom rather than by leaving my classroom and writing about topics that other teachers viewed as top-down pressures. Nonetheless, I am glad that I found a way to begin establishing a voice.

As the criticism of teachers and schooling had swelled in the 1980s, I had felt a need for my colleagues and me to argue in writing against the simplistic “back to the basics” schemes. I worried that in the 1990s our voices were still not being used as effectively as they might. After a decade and a half in the profession, I felt relatively uninformed about the educational literature, and I believed that I needed to read research in order to be able to fully join the educational debates. I eventually enrolled in a doctoral program through Michigan State University's Department of Teacher Education. My professional development trek at the university allowed me to seek the written version of the teacher's voice. Through studies of writers such as Vivian Paley, Eliot Wigginton, Regie Routman, Linda Rief, Robert Coles, Nancie Atwell, Bailey White, and others, I have witnessed

individuals who have established their voices—some without leaving the classroom as I did.

I admire these authors, and I wish to help others follow in their pathways, even if we followers do not all succeed quite as famously. My goal is in keeping with what Hollingsworth (1994) claimed is the ultimate goal of “voices” research: to establish conditions wherein the “Others” can represent themselves, and not be only represented by advocates. I began to help other teachers write their own stories whenever I could. For example, in 1992-93 I was one of several who helped Stevie Brinkerhoff, an elementary teacher from southwestern Michigan, prepare and publish through the Michigan Reading Association (MRA) a book called *Linking: Developing Strategic Readers and Writers in the Primary Classroom*. Over the course of the first year, several thousand copies of this spiral-bound, 77-page booklet were sold. Such healthy sales, despite comparatively meager marketing strategies, showed me that teachers were eager to read discourse from their peers.

Despite the exemplary teacher-authors like Brinkerhoff and the others that I have just listed, I take it as a given that as of 1995 teachers share ideas primarily through oral means rather than through written records. While oral discourse serves teachers’ needs much of the time, it is a less permanent mode of communication than written discourse. Consequently, teachers who want to influence the future of their profession are attracted to written discourse. I also take as given that teachers need to develop throughout their careers. I begin with a bias that writing groups can be an important professional development tool for any profession—a legitimate vehicle for communicating important information about discoveries and problems. The original central question of my research was this: What role can written discourse play in helping individual teachers develop professionally? What role can it play in helping the profession

develop over time? More specifically, I wanted to find out to what extent teachers' sharing of their own writings about the classroom is a professional development activity that is well suited to teachers in the later stages of their career.

This inquiry is important because K-12 teachers need to advance in three ways: by developing across their entire careers through meaningful inquiry and self-examination, by building a legacy for themselves based on their career-long reflection and development, and by asserting their professional voices in the public debate of educational issues. Teachers have little or no personally-recorded history of their practice (Little, 1987; Lortie, 1975; Rice & Richlin, 1993; Shannon, 1995; Shulman, 1987), and teachers' voices are largely missing from the educational research in general (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990, 1993; Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993; Erickson, 1986; Goodson, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1993). These voids are a concern in two ways: (1) though teachers profess the power of the written word to students, they do not use recorded text to help each other progress professionally,¹ and (2) the public education system is more vulnerable to political manipulation because teaching lacks a history of professional practice (Florio-Ruane, 1995; Lortie, 1975). It is especially important for teachers to establish their collective histories in order to prevent the manipulations of education which we have experienced in this country—e.g., *Goals 2000* represented the establishing of educational goals for the nation with precious little input from professional educators (Clinchy, 1991).

What can teachers do to establish a history and teach each other? The answer relates both to writing and to empowerment. If power means control, then voice means having a way to make one's self heard. When I wrote from the position of a state department representative, my confidence may have been enlarged, but my

¹ This is not meant to make teachers sound hypocritical; in fact, their work conditions preclude regular written communication other than with parents and students.