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## **A Marathon, Not A Sprint: Preserving the Profession through Professional Networks**

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# A Marathon, Not A Sprint: Preserving the Profession through Professional Networks

by Sheila Benson and Trudy McKeag

**Sheila:** In my first English education position out of graduate school, teacher leadership was heavily emphasized. All teacher education candidates took a course called “Teacher as Leader” which emphasized that teachers were leaders, whether or not they held a designated administrative position. Program designers believed that if new teachers recognized themselves as leaders from the outset, they would be active in their schools and be set up for longevity. The goal was to counteract the 50% turnover rate for English language arts teachers within the first five years (Ingersoll and Smith).

Five years later, I tracked my first set of teacher candidates. True to the statistics, half of them were no longer in the classroom. Even more disturbing, many of those who had left the classroom had been my strongest teachers. A lot of factors played into these teachers leaving, and I don’t intend to create some kind of correlation. I wondered, though, and I worried. We had talked in methods courses about balancing work life and personal life. We had explored ways to assess writing in order to foster student growth rather than police errors. I had spent so much time working to nurture, to counterbalance the burnout trend. What happened to these teachers’ initial vision of themselves as leaders?

A few years later, teaching at a different university, I think about the 50% who remained in the classroom. They are now approaching mid-career. No longer the newbies, they supposedly know all the ropes. But are they in for the long haul? What will keep them going? This issue of *The New Jersey English Journal* explores how the teaching profession is changing and what we can do to preserve it. I would argue that teachers’ sense of themselves as leaders must be nurtured if we expect longevity. Teachers need to have their expertise recognized, whether they have a leadership title or not.

This article describes how the authors, an English education professor (Sheila) and a high school English language arts teacher (Trudy), learned together how to re-think teacher leadership and teacher mentoring. Our participation in the Teacher as Leader program, sponsored by the Iowa Writing Project, offered multiple opportunities to reflect on what brought us to teaching and why we keep doing it. Even more importantly, our partnership opened new lines of communication within our own buildings and across broader contexts (i.e., high schools and universities communicating). We present our story as an instance of how mid-career teachers might find a way to preserve, and even extend, their teacher voices in a climate where teachers’ expertise is being increasingly overlooked. We present the broader context of the program followed by multi-voiced scenes representing key moments in this journey, using them to discuss insights along the way.

## **The Teacher as Leader Program**

Funded by a Federal Title II SEED grant through the National Writing Project, the Teacher as Leader program paired early and mid-career teachers with more experienced mentor teacher leaders to explore, as a full group and in mentoring partnerships, how teachers can advocate for sound

curricular decisions and writing practices in an environment of increased standardization. The initiative was designed to foster collaboration across schools, across the state, and across various levels of teacher preparation and to help newer teacher leaders recognize that they have a voice in the decisions that affect their work.

The year-long initiative began with a two-day workshop in mid-August. We read a series of articles about teacher leadership and discussed how to develop or enhance leadership roles in individual sites and positions. Readings ranged from articles about anticipated effects of the Common Core Standards on curricula (e.g., Beach, Thein, Haertling & Webb) to models of how teachers have learned to speak up about what happens in their classrooms and what additional support they need (e.g., Hargreaves & Fullan). The goal was to think as a group about various iterations of teacher leadership and then apply that thinking to specific school contexts during the school year. We arranged in our partnerships how often to meet and what aspect of teacher leadership we wanted to explore together. Approximately once every two months we met as a full group to discuss more teacher leadership issues and share how our partnerships were working. Trudy and I decided to meet, either via Skype or phone, roughly once a month, with email exchanges as needed along the way. Our focus: helping Trudy feel confident about expressing her opinions.

### **Scene 1: Why even do this? What am I getting myself into?**

**Trudy:** I signed up for the opportunity to participate in the leadership class after I was asked to be on my school's professional development committee. I didn't really view myself as a "leader" and, honestly, I wondered why they asked me to be on the committee. When we met for the summer session, I thought I understood why I was asked: I am a worker bee. I'm a people pleaser. I sensed that the committee asked me because I would nod my head and agree. I may be wrong, but that was my gut feeling. The Individual Career Development Plan (ICDP) committee's job included working in a collaborative team with an equal amount of administrators and teachers serving as members. I was hoping this would be an opportunity for me to help make decisions concerning professional development days that are often viewed as wasted time by many of my colleagues. My goal was to help devise ways to make this time feel more useful to my colleagues.

When the opportunity arose to join the Teacher as Leader program two months later, I knew I needed to be around other leaders and work on developing my skills. My voice needed to be heard. Sitting back and letting others make decisions for me has never been my intention, yet it was happening to me. It was time for me to learn to speak up and find my leadership role within the school, as I had in other areas of my life.

**Sheila:** When the director of the leadership initiative invited me to participate, I immediately wanted to be involved. A key component of the initiative was the formation of teacher-mentor partnerships, and, as a new English education professor, I was anxious to work more closely with local English language arts teachers. At the same time, this was the piece of the project that made me just a little nervous. I was just beginning my second year at my university, and I hadn't spent any time in local schools. Sure, I could talk about larger leadership issues and mentorship overall, and I believed in it, but what could I offer specific teachers? What ethos did I have? Yes, I was beginning my 19<sup>th</sup> year of teaching, but my classroom context was very different from a full-time high school teacher's context.

Both of us were looking forward to a mentoring relationship, but neither of us fit traditional mentoring roles. Instead of a first-year teacher and a more experienced teacher within the same building, we were a teacher who was in her seventh year and a university professor who was fairly new to the area. The university professor did not know the teacher's local context, and the teacher was confident in her teaching role while still developing her identity as a leader in her building. During our first meeting, we realized that there was no pre-set model for how things would unfold; we were going to need to create as we went. We discussed Trudy's upcoming ICDP planning committee meeting and decided to see how it would progress, then meet and discuss what happened. Serving on that committee was her first official leadership role, and she was anxious to have a say in what would happen in her building.

## **Scene 2: Discovering a voice**

**Trudy:** After a long day in the classroom, I wasn't too excited about attending my second professional development meeting of my three year term. It was fall; the air was crisp and the shiny new heels that felt good that morning were pinching my toes after a long day of walking the classroom floor and school halls. Traveling to our middle school, I pulled up and a sense of dread washed over me. I didn't feel like I was needed at the meeting and, honestly, felt I had better things to do with my time. I went to the meeting anyway because I made the commitment. Maybe this meeting would be different from the first. Maybe we would be discussing options for professional development time, and all of us would have a say. However, that isn't how the meeting went down.

Five administrators, five district teachers, and our curriculum coordinator sat elbow to elbow in a small room. Our curriculum person led the meeting and informed the group how our professional development time would be used over the school year. A Google Doc was shared with us, laying out each day and the expectations for said days. Opinions weren't asked, and it seemed evident they weren't wanted. A few teachers voiced concerns they brought with them from other colleagues back in the trenches, only to be greeted by head nods from all sitting at the table. The curriculum coordinator moved on with his agenda. No one pushed any issues and discussions didn't occur. What was presented by the curriculum coordinator was stamped and delivered and to be implemented. Not what I was hoping for.

**Sheila:** Because of distance, Trudy and I decided to Skype a few weeks into the school year. She would report back about how her first professional development planning meeting went, and my role was to listen as she described her experience. She spoke of wanting to speak up all meeting and then being shut down when she finally did express an opinion. She expressed concern about why she'd been put on the committee since planning decisions had basically already been made. She worried aloud about being seen as a "yes person." This didn't sound healthy to me. Long silence. "Well, Trudy, what do you feel your role is on this committee? How would you like me to help you? Is this where you feel like your leadership can best be developed?" We talked a little more, and Trudy decided that part of her frustration was her inability to actually change anything within the professional development committee. Perhaps this wasn't the area to focus on. Instead, she decided to listen hard and use me as a sounding board for her thoughts after meetings. Her long-range goal was to feel confident enough to speak up in a later meeting. In the meantime, we would shift focus to developing her leadership in her classroom, where she would soon receive a student teacher.

### Scene 3: Enter student teacher

**Trudy:** A student teacher contacted me after hearing about my teaching style through a former teacher's associate who had spent a considerable amount of time in my classroom. I was proud that someone thought I was a good enough teacher to request me as a cooperating teacher. I felt I had enough experience under my belt to take on a student teacher, and I felt comfortable enough with my teaching world to let someone in. This student teacher and I shared some similarities. We were both non-traditional teachers with real-world work experience and families. I thought she would bring with her a similar skill set that I brought with me to my student teaching experience. One classroom incident stands out in particular to show where my assumptions led to problems.

In Iowa, student teaching is scaffolded to gradually increase the student teacher's independent control of the classroom, leading ultimately to the student teacher being in the room without the cooperating teacher. We worked towards this goal gradually, and on the day in question, the student teacher would be entirely in charge of third period. The day she was to start on her own seemed safe enough to me. Students were watching a video. What could go wrong? She watched me go over pre-viewing information in the first class, then she went over the material with the second class while I was still present. I then exited between the second and third classes, so students would see her as the authority figure in the room. When I realized I had left material I was assessing in the classroom, I decided to pop back in to grab it while students watched the video. To my surprise, the student teacher was sitting at my desk with her back turned to the class, and she was talking on her cell phone while the students watched the video. Upon my entering the classroom, she turned around, her face went white, and with a spreading shocked look, she quickly hung up the phone.

I was dumbfounded. Hadn't I set a strong enough example? Wasn't it obvious to any person in a teaching position that having a personal conversation on a cell phone during class wasn't acceptable? The moment was awkward for both of us. I wasn't quite sure how to address the issue, so in my feeble attempt to redirect such behaviors, at the end of the day when she and I debriefed about how the day went, I mentioned that it was important to set the example and tone in the classroom. By the time my student teacher left my care, it was evident that she had learned something from her experience working with me, as she was setting stronger classroom behavior examples for students. She was well on her way to becoming an independent educator. I, too, was becoming more confident in how to handle difficult classroom situations, such as described above. Still, I needed to process what had happened, and my mentoring partnership was the perfect place to do so.

**Sheila:** It was now February, and we were meeting for a day-long teacher-leader cohort workshop session. After a series of structured writings and discussions, Trudy and I used our lunch break to catch up on how her semester had gone and where I could support her now. We talked about how things went with her student teacher. Apparently not so well. The student teacher was less able to make solid management decisions than Trudy had expected, decisions that she hadn't realized she needed to guide her student teacher through.

Trudy spoke of feeling unprepared to approach such a scenario. She berated herself for not having an immediate sense of what to do. I reminded her that this was her first student teacher, and there was no way she could have had immediate answers to every possible scenario. Instead, we focused on what she learned about herself as a cooperating teacher, with me asking questions: What sort of

supervisory support did the student teacher have from her university? What did you do when you saw her using her cell phone? If you could do this all over again, what would you change? Trudy felt deflated that her cooperating teaching experience hadn't gone as she'd envisioned, and my priority was helping her feel confident. She needed a sounding board to help her run scenarios so that she would be willing to lead out another time.

A lot of attention is paid, with good reason, to the student teacher side of the equation. As Trudy's experience demonstrates, however, situations arise where cooperating teachers need support as well. Cooperating teachers don't just magically know what to explain and what to do when a student teacher makes a less than professional choice. This was a case where, again, distance worked to our advantage. Had I been local, it would have been easy for Trudy to share what happened and then step out of the way while I swooped in to "fix" things. Instead, Trudy needed to exercise her leadership, deciding how to handle the situation in the moment. Our partnership provided an opportunity to revisit the scene with new eyes. I didn't know the context, so all I could do was listen and ask questions; Trudy did all the active processing. As a result, Trudy became more confident as a leader, and I learned the power of creating a processing space.

#### **Scene 4: Broadening horizons**

**Sheila:** A few weeks after the student teacher conversation, Trudy e-mailed me that she was considering doctoral work and asked if we could talk about that during our next meeting. In fact, she was considering the doctoral program from which I had graduated. During a phone meeting, we discussed the dual-credit college speech and writing course she taught. Some changes were in the works related to the speech element, and we bounced around her ideas about pursuing a speech endorsement. This was a different Trudy, a more confident Trudy. She kept saying things like, "I'm going to do this. I want to do this. This is for me." I couldn't see her smiling, but I could hear it in her voice. The conversation turned to doctoral work. "What's your end goal with this? Where do you see yourself after doctoral study?" Trudy wanted additional intellectual conversations, but she really didn't want to leave her classroom. She was happy there. "I'm not saying you have to leave the classroom once you have a doctoral degree, but doctoral work changes you. That change can be good, but it can also be uncomfortable. You cross a borderline that for most people moves them out of the classroom. Is that what you want?"

**Trudy:** I sat, thinking. I truly love working with my students. Did I really want to give that up? And for what? A title? The title isn't that important to me. I love to learn. I love to take classes. Before talking with Sheila, it just made sense that if I were going to take classes, why not have them count towards a degree? I didn't consider the implications a Ph.D. could have on my current career path or if I were truly ready to go down that road.

Sheila had talked with a number of students in the past who had been considering pursuing doctoral work. The difference here was that the conversation was with a me, a practicing teacher rather than a pre-service teacher still basking in the glow of the university setting. Also different was the more extensive relationship with me. This wasn't just an advising meeting, batting around possible career trajectories; I had a strong teacher identity, and I understood that whatever decision I made would need to keep that teacher identity in the forefront. Because we had been working together all year, we could talk in terms of concrete factors rather than possibilities. Our conversations had also



nudged me to think about how I could maintain these professional conversations beyond our time in the Teacher as Leader program.

### **Final Scene: Reflecting on the project and moving into direct leadership**

**Sheila:** This was a different kind of mentoring experience for me because the typical things I think of with mentoring didn't happen. I never set foot inside my mentee's school. I never watched her teach. No after-school debriefings at the end of an observation. Some mentors joined their mentees for department meetings or became part of professional learning communities, but my mentee was experienced and didn't need hand-holding. What she wanted—and needed—was reassurance that she had expertise. She wanted to think aloud about things she was thinking of trying in her classroom. She was a strong classroom teacher, and because of that strength, opportunities were opening for her to step into more visible leadership roles. But because there were a lot of other strong leaders in her department, she didn't want to step on toes. Trudy worried that because her leadership activities didn't look like her mental picture of teacher leadership, she wasn't really a leader. We continually talked about how she *was* a leader and how leadership looks different in different contexts and with different teachers.

**Trudy:** My leadership skills have certainly continued to grow and develop over the past two years. Because of our mentorship, I feel confident speaking up and leading out. I am now the treasurer of our local education association and have also been asked by colleagues to be present when they have needed to talk with administration about issues that could impact their careers. This shows that my colleagues are viewing me as a leader. The more I'm viewed as a leader, the more confidence I gain. Attending several Standards Based-Grading (SBG) conferences over the past two years has also put me in a leadership role. Our school is moving towards an SBG system and I am voluntarily working with a small group of colleagues and administrators to pilot this movement in our school. While I am not in a traditional leadership role, such as department chair, I feel that I have grown as a leader over the last two years. Trusting my inner voice is getting easier each day and communicating those inner thoughts is no longer a source of fear but one of empowerment. I am finding that my colleagues and administrators are not only willing to listen to me, but they actually value my opinions and input, even seek them out.

My time spent on the ICDP committee was a time of growth and learning for me as a building leader. I learned a great deal about how my school's internal committees work and what role I played within one of those committees. After our continued mentoring conversations, after several ICDP meetings I began to voice my opinion and share my views, which was a major victory for me. I wouldn't say the outcomes of those meetings were altered by me voicing my concerns and opinions, but I would say that I gained respect from colleagues and administrators from doing so.

### **Conclusions:**

Trudy's confidence level now, her ability to see herself as a leader in her school regardless of outside position (e.g., department chair), contrasts sharply with her beginning stance. She is a perfect example of a teacher who would fly under the radar in a more traditional mentoring scenario. Already a strong teacher, it would have been easy for her to continue through her career in her teaching comfort zone, letting other teachers take on more visible leadership positions and make

decisions within her building. So much is done *to* teachers or handed down from administrators, and taking steps beyond the comfort zone is intimidating. Part of her willingness to take those steps came from having a safe mentoring space to try out ideas before making them public.

Participating in this mentoring team was energizing for both of us. Through our conversations, Trudy was able to think about her growing leadership, and she was able to build confidence to speak up in other professional settings. Seeing Trudy's professional voice bloom was, in turn, the most rewarding part of this experience for Sheila. Trudy came alive in our conversations in a way she hadn't at the beginning of our mentorship. She's now confident, excited to speak up with colleagues about what's happening in her classroom. We even sat together at the most recent Assembly for Literature on Adolescents (ALAN) national workshop, learning together about new young adult texts we can bring into schools.

If we want teaching to remain strong, teachers need to remain in the classroom. They need to see themselves as valued within their buildings. We hope that our mentorship experience can serve as inspiration for other teachers to reflect on what they do to maintain their own longevity. Perhaps then we can really make progress in beating the new teacher burnout statistics.

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