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The Role of Professional Development in a Lifelong Career:

An Interview with Mary G. Bennett

by Patricia Bender

Mary Bennett often encourages her colleagues and her student teachers to "be intentional," and they soon realize they are talking to someone with a substantial and sustaining practice of intentionality. Her expertise in this area can be seen often in her habit and methods of taking notes which started in 1965 when she was instructed by her first high school English teacher, Thomas P. Hunt, to see her writing in a notebook not as copying but rather as making her own map.

She has perfected her own notebook style often drawing arrows and other indicators to place emphasis on key concepts and questions that arise when she is reading for professional or personal reasons or participating in a class or workshop. She returns to certain pages and sections multiple times, uses small spiral notebooks so they fit in her purse when traveling, and always keeps one close by even at home. Seeing herself as a visual learner, she understands that writing things out is the way she processes information.

She describes herself as a close reader and enjoys the physical activity of taking notes. After 51 years and counting, she is convinced that her notebook practice gives her the power of retention among other things and she plans to keep deepening her expertise, one notebook at a time.

Mary G. Bennett, Adjunct Faculty, Secondary and Special Education, at Montclair State University, and Teacher Coach at Seton Hall University, acknowledges that professional development has played a role in her entire 43-year career spent in education. In her work as a high school English Language Arts teacher for 10 years and then for 16 years in various administrative positions, she notes that professional development provided by her district, the Newark Public Schools, was, for the most part, designed to help to carry out district requirements. "Seldom was the professional development the type that inspired me," Bennett says. Most professional development was "the sit and git" variety with someone sharing information or training to encourage compliance with new requirements. Bennett found very often that reading and researching on her own "tended to be more helpful" in her effort to fully comprehend and then carry out the required tasks and duties.

Bennett continues to seek professional development opportunities describing herself as "curious." And she sees professional development extending beyond her school life. "I want to know and I want to grow. I am driven by my desire to feel that I have enough understanding about a given topic that I can use it effectively in my work and perhaps in my everyday life."

Bennett did have some great professional development experiences along the way and she described in some detail the Harvard Principals Leadership Institute which she attended for 10 days in July of 1995. Bennett found each day at the Institute filled with opportunities. She recalls how:

120 principals from all over the US, Canada, Mexico and London gathered to read, listen to presentations from people known to be gurus in education, and participate in workshops that gave us time to discuss, reflect, digest and ponder the relevance of the presentations we experienced. Daily, there was time to read, write, share and consider our work back in our schools, our effectiveness and what we might do to make things better for our school communities through our leadership.

This professional development was not offered by Bennett's school district. She found out about a foundation that annually offered a Request for Proposals to educators in her district to apply for grants to do something for self-improvement. Bennett describes herself as "lucky" noting "I submitted a proposal and it was accepted." The \$5000 grant covered most of her expense including the registration fee, hotel and meals allowing her to immerse herself in the experience. The structure of the Institute provided a much needed component of development in Bennett's view: time.

In addition to the financial cost of professional development, when grants and district support are not available, Bennett notes lack of time as a hindrance finding, for example in her former school district, whether as a teacher or administrator, it was not easy to get the release time during the school year to attend conferences, seminars or workshops that the district did not sponsor. In addition, the funds were limited. If she could get the release time, most often she had to pay for the professional development activity.

At this stage in her career, Bennett has decided if there is a session or a conference that she wants to attend, she does. "Now, I am not school district employee, and it is up to me to continue to read, research and keep up with the current issues of the time that are impacting schools." Her current work includes being a Teacher Coach, Mentor/Critical Friend and Facilitator and she develops and presents professional development for schools in some of this work. Therefore, Bennett says, "I must stay in the mode of being a lifelong learner. Definitely, my interests and my work spur me on to find opportunities for the professional development that I need and want."

Bennett challenges herself to see if she can take some idea or practice that is seemingly new and tie it back to something that was in the field before, but called by a different name and possibly packaged or presented another way. She remains encouraged about the integration of learning across grades and across subjects that creates incredible opportunities for students, teachers and administrators.

Bennett captures her commitment to lifelong professional development and her dedication to teaching and mentoring saying: "Learning excites me. Helping and supporting others' learning excites me. There is always something to learn."

Patricia Bender, Assistant Editor of *New Jersey English Journal*, interviewed Mary Bennett for this issue of the journal.