Chapter XXIII
E–Mail Reflection Groups as Collaborative Action Research

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ABSTRACT

Departmental e-mail reflection groups promise to help resolve two of the most pressing problems facing the teaching profession, finding time for meaningful, ongoing professional development (Cook, 1997) and the retention of new teachers (Reed, Reuben, & Barbour, 2006). The ultimate goal of teacher research and all other forms of professional development is learning, learning to be a better teacher. Though learning is often defined as lasting change (Driscoll, 2000), little change occurs in a vacuum. One path to professional development for teachers is personal reflection, but its power to generate meaningful change is limited by the individual teacher's existing knowledge and experience. On the other hand, meaningful change tends to flourish in cultures defined by rich social interaction (Piirto, 1992). Though classroom teachers can and sometimes do draw inspiration and ideas from other educators (Manning, 2006), practical opportunities for this are much too rare (Selwyn, 2000).

INTRODUCTION

Change is not always perceived to be a good thing, and change for the sake of change rarely is, especially in education. Positive and persisting change in education tends to emerge most often from thoughtful, systematic approaches to learning. A systematic approach to learning is a common definition of research. It follows then that effective professional development for educators requires a systematic approach and access to a richly interactive learning context.

Defining Research

Though the general definition of research enjoys wide acceptance, what constitutes a systematic approach does not. What then is teacher research? Is it one thing or is it many? Recognizing the complex practical realities of teacher research, MacLean and Mohr (1999) define teacher research as any inquiry conducted by teachers that is intentional, systematic, public, voluntary, ethical, and contextual.

Stagnant Momentum and Resistance to Change

The public schools suffer from a history of daunting stagnant momentum, resisting any effort to change, hanging doggedly onto centuries of tradition and precedence. Consequently, though all manner of school reform comes and goes with some regularity, what transpires in schools today is remarkably similar to what went on a hundred years ago. With the single exception of the public schools, most aspects of day to day life in 21st Century America would seem alien and be almost unrecognizable to people living a hundred years ago. Though faces change, textbooks change, buildings change, politics change, and school jargon is revised from time to time, like schools themselves, teaching evolves so slowly that it seems almost set in stone.

Though teaching evolves slowly, it does evolve and improve. However, again and again, it seems educators must relearn that all meaningful and lasting change in the public school emerges from within, from the core. At the core of the public schools is the classroom teacher. Schools are resistant to change, because teachers are resistant to change (Rusch & Perry, 1993). Only when teachers are the agents of change does real and lasting change occur in the public schools.

This chapter forwards the argument that active participation in a private e-mail discussion group can reduce teacher isolation and facilitate the growth of personal and professional relationships within content area departments in secondary schools. It also describes how active membership in an e-mail discussion group successfully transformed one such department into a reflective, supportive, self sustaining, close-knit, and collegial unit, ultimately resulting in lasting cultural, curricular, and instructional reform within the department.

BACKGROUND

Institutionalized Isolation

Though teachers' resistance to change is complex and bound up in the larger context of personal traits and school culture, one cause of this resistance is institutionalized professional isolation. Teachers are held apart from other teachers by a combination of personal pride, institutional limitations, and cultural taboos. It is not that teachers are oblivious to the need for improvement or outside influences on their practice. Managing and interacting with students, planning, and the many other acts that define teaching dominate teachers' attention for most of their waking hours. The experience is physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting, leaving little desire for anything that might intrude further into their lives. Also, especially among less experienced teachers, ready acceptance of change may be seen as a professional challenge or an admission of failure, and so they find fault in any practice that diverges from their own. Teacher culture inhibits teachers from seeking or accepting advice from their colleagues. Though formal mentoring of new teachers is a recent attempt to change this, teachers are expected to "know it all," from the moment they accept that mantle.

Acceptance of this culture of isolation begins early, well before the student becomes the teacher. From a child's perspective, each teacher is an island, each classroom a sovereign entity. Rules and ideas are specific to each classroom,

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