Opening Up the Classroom Door: Writing for Publication

When we picture "professional development," we tend to picture teachers sitting in a room with a presenter, attending a workshop, or taking a class. Yet the potential for one powerful form of professional development is right in your hands (or right on your screen) as you read the pages of this journal: writing about your teaching practice or classroom inquiry for an audience of fellow teachers is a professional development opportunity that can foster significant changes in both the way you teach writing and the way you function as a professional and a person.

A quick glance into the pages of *Voices from the Middle* reveals that a sizeable percentage of the contributors are classroom teachers; in fact, 32.5% of articles published in *Voices* between 1998 and the first half of 2008 were active classroom teachers at the time of publication (Whitney, 2009a). So what motivates this large group of teacher-authors to draft and submit articles? In most cases, publishing an article won't get a K–12 teacher fame or fortune—it's a rare school that is inclined to, or can even afford to, reward teachers financially for professional accomplishments. Yet the pages of journals published by NCTE, its state affiliates, and organizations such as the International Reading Association or any of many other organizations for teachers are filled with firsthand accounts of teaching practice and classroom inquiry; they are written by teachers who we know have calendars filled with planning, grading, extracurricular activities, and working with students. In this article, I'd like to share some of the reasons middle level teachers might want to write for publication, and then offer some practical suggestions on how to begin.

Why Do Teachers Publish?

Teachers publish because it influences their teaching.

One of the most powerful things we can do to improve the way we teach writing is to try some writing ourselves. When we write, we remember what it means to do something new and difficult. This new perspective—from inside the problems and concerns students might have with an assignment—gives us a fresh angle when planning instruction for students. When we write often, we better know how an assignment feels, which parts of it seem routine and which seem intrusive. And perhaps most important, we get a sense of how it feels to write about topics we choose ourselves for purposes we set ourselves; we feel invested when we choose forms appropriate to those topics and purposes and make decisions about the piece based on its direction and the responses of real readers. How different this is from most school writing, in which students take up a topic set by us, in forms set by us, writing for an audience of us! We know students need agency over their written work, but it takes our own experience to keep this knowledge functional.

Further, many teacher-written articles document classroom inquiry projects conducted by teachers as they look critically at their own practice. Teacher research has become an integral part

of the overall research landscape in education, and the connections between conducting teacher research, engaging in professional development, and working more effectively with students are well documented (e.g. Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Wall, 2004).

Teachers publish because it expands the audience for their professional work.

We know that "closing my door and teaching" can lead to isolation, but even with the door open, it's not always apparent that anyone outside is paying attention. Students, of course, are at the center of what we do as teachers, but there are other important "audiences" for teaching, such as the wider communities of the school, the town, or the field of education. Writing for publication can connect teachers to the community of the field in a new way. Rather than consuming the ideas of others through reading and attending workshops, teachers who publish *exchange* ideas, contributing to others' teaching practice and becoming active participants in the conversation of the field as a whole. It changes one's sense of a "community of colleagues" from just the teacher next door or the group around the lunch table to the larger group of specialists in language arts whose work crosses a broad range of settings.

Sometimes publishing simply attracts attention or recognition that was hard to come by

SIDE TRIP: SO YOU SUBMITTED A MANUSCRIPT—NOW WHAT?

The most peaceful/excruciating moment of a writer's life arrives at the mailbox. As the carefully addressed manuscript slides into the darkness of the receptacle, a feeling of contentment descends: I'm finished! This is followed moments later by a second realization: what if they don't like it?

These two emotions (especially the second) are heightened by the protracted waiting period that is typical with most journals. My experience has been that the stated wait time should be viewed as a guideline only. In many cases, it is not uncommon for the process to exceed their expected review period. This is usually due to the complications associated with coordinating the reviews conducted by the journal's editorial board, a process most editors would describe as "herding cats." You know how difficult it is to get your students to turn in their work on time? It's worse with adults!

However, that review process is vital to the health of the journal. Top journals employ a blind, peer-reviewed process, which means that all identifying information is removed so that reviewers can read the manuscript and evaluate it on its merits alone. Multiple reviewers read the manuscript and often submit detailed written feedback to the editor. The editor then takes each of the reviews into consideration and applies his or her judgment for a final decision. It is at this point that you will be contacted with a decision and feedback.

Now that peaceful/excruciating feeling returns as you withdraw the journal's letter from your mailbox. Did they like it? Take a deep breath, remind yourself that you are a good person with lots of wonderful qualities, and then open the letter. The best news, of course, is "accept as is." Know that this is exceedingly rare, and that a more realistic hope is "accept with revisions." Alternatively, you may be invited to "revise and resubmit," which means that the reviewers saw potential in the manuscript for their journal and would be willing to read another version. It's also possible that the manuscript will be rejected. This isn't a statement of your personal character, but rather a carefully considered decision about how well this manuscript fits the journal's mission. Perhaps it fits better in another journal; reviewers will often make that recommendation. Whatever the decision, read the reviewers' detailed feedback with an open mind. Even with a rejected piece, this is invaluable feedback that typically results in a stronger revision.

The peer review process is one that we teach in our classrooms. It is essential for the growth of all writers. Feedback, even the kind you disagree with, can prompt the gains you desire in your writing journey.

—Nancy Frey

within the classroom walls. As one teacher explained to her class, publication leaves a record, a mark of achievement:

> I have expressed to the kids that the things I have gotten awards for [are] almost always from something I wrote—that as much as I might do something good in a classroom, nobody knows it, but that when you put something in writing and you put your name on the bottom of it, it's usually what you get your rewards for. You can have great stuff going on in your mind, but if you can't get it down on a piece of paper, you don't get credit for it.

Certainly teaching well *should* be rewarded, whether it is made public or not, and many of the best teachers never do find the recognition they deserve. But for this teacher, publishing was a way to finally "get credit" for the good work she had been doing all along.

At a more fundamental level, looking at one's teaching to make it understandable to others is by itself a professional development activity. We know, for example, that teachers like those working with the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) K–12 Program (http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/programs/index.asp?key=32) and teachers who make presentations at workshops and conferences have, in examining their practice and searching for ways of representing it for others, also come to understand that practice more deeply, sometimes revising it even as they describe it (see Hatch, 2005; Hatch et al., 2005; Stock, 2005). We also know that writing in general promotes reflection and can foster change. It makes sense, then, that writing about one's teaching would also have the potential to shape it, and that critical inquiry into one's own teaching would frequently lead to writing for publication. As one teacher put it:

> I think looking critically at my own classroom, the schools that I have worked in, and then more broadly at the education field as a member of an inquiry community has really sparked my interest in writing about what I see. And then just sending it in to various people—that resulted in some of those articles being published.

Many teachers who publish also report that it influences their confidence in powerful ways. The relationships between writing and claiming one's authority as a teacher, both inside and out of the classroom, are clear (Whitney, 2009b). When teachers are active, full participants in the discourse of the field, they have confidence to speak as principled practitioners and professionals—a confidence that carries over into their relationships in and out of school. In the words of a retired teacher and article author, writing "made me feel like I was a professional writer—I think it also gave me confidence that I am a teacher and I have things to share." Another teacher talked about his publishing an article about classroom practice as a factor in his "coming into his own" as a teacher: "At that point, I started to see myself as having a perspective to offer."

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Teachers publish because they can change things.

Another important (and not unrelated) thing that happens when teachers speak through publication to an audience beyond the classroom walls is that the voices of teachers become louder and harder for those outside the classroom to ignore. That the voices of teachers be included in the conversations of our field—alongside those of researchers, university educators, and others committed to language arts education—is necessary from a democratic point of view. Given that it is classroom teachers who do the day-to-day work of teaching language arts, it follows that teachers should strongly influence what is said about language arts, how language arts teaching is talked about, and how knowledge about language arts teaching is generated. Yet many, if not most, of the professional articles in the field of language arts are authored by university-based scholars, who typically have much greater institutional support for writing and publishing and better access to the discourse of published scholarship (along with

pressure to publish that comes with those advantages). These are usually people (like me) who were former teachers themselves and who have much to offer in terms of research expertise and broad theoretical and historical perspective on the problems of our field, but who also value teachers and want to partner with them to shape the discourse of the field.

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Articles by classroom teachers thus have the power to inform university researchers and teacher educators, making the field as a whole more responsive to the realities of the classroom and more democratic in the voices it sustains. One teacher-author, who edited a book of teacher-written articles, said about that book's influence that she was especially proud of "looking in other published literature in the field and seeing teachers' work from our book being cited." Having published as a classroom teacher, she found in editing the book a way to invite other teachers to do the same, and she takes pride in the way those teachers' articles have been taken up by researchers across the field. "I think it's important," she explained, "because it shows that teachers have a knowledge that other people can use as a resource."

Having taken on this role as teacher-author and active publisher, she has been able to influence university researchers' relationship to teachers, not only in this indirect manner but sometimes directly as well. She told of working with a university researcher who had written a piece in which "he was writing about teacher knowledge and belief. I just felt like he was writing about teachers as if we were more objects of study than people who were agents in our own right. I suggested that he begin to read some teacher research and that he begin to cite some teachers in his chapter." The scholar took this teacher's advice, and in time, his portrayal of classroom teachers and teacher-research in his own writing shifted:

> He moved from just seeing us as people who were the focus of study to people who were actually conducting research in their own classrooms that would have some meaning. And while many of us . . . respect the work of teachers, there are so many people outside of that community who don't see what we do as real research to begin with. So having him make that shift was significant.

I think it's enough simply to get teachers heard in this way. But sometimes the results of amplifying a teacher's voice through publication are even more tangible. When a district budget crisis threatened the survival of a writing center one teacher had worked to create, she published an article in a National Writing Project publication:

> I wrote an article [saying that] if the school district could afford to pay all the money that it was paying for coaching, why in the world wouldn't it spend the money on writing coaching? Because in fact, the bigger bang for the buck was to get your kids into good colleges than it was to get your kids on a baseball team. . . . They had a huge athletic program.

While this teacher believes athletics are still of inordinate importance to the school district, having the article in print became a powerful tool for change. She recalled:

> [The article] was important because the whole concept of it was used then to help persuade my school district to continue to fund a writing center, and it was [one of] the first writing centers in the country. [T]hat article made a difference. That's why my school district funded it.

All of this is not to say that teacher-authors and university-based authors are somehow at odds with one another or have conflicting stakes in the published work in our field. To the contrary, many of the finest examples of published work in language arts education stem from collaborations between partners at the school and university levels. To cite just one recent example from the pages of *Voices from the Middle*, Bryant and Daniels' September 2008 article "Power, Voice, and Empowerment: Classroom Committees in a Middle Level Language Arts Curriculum" describes an inquiry that began as a teacher-research paper assigned in

a teacher education class taught by Bryant; it evolved into a partnership over a period of three years in Daniels' middle school classroom. Their collaboration enriches both these two colleagues and the field beyond their classrooms.

Practical Advice on Writing for Professional Publication

Teachers interested in writing for publication sometimes worry that their own perspectives might not be of interest to others beyond the local sphere, but the articles published in *Voices from the Middle* and other publications like it show that even the most local slice of teaching practice, vividly described and thoughtfully discussed, can enrich teacher-readers across a broad range of contexts. Other potential barriers to writing for publication are more practical: teachers may have trouble writing in an unfamiliar format, gauging what background their audience needs to know,

SIDE TRIP: OPENING UP THE DOOR FOR STUDENTS

Students can benefit from publishing their work in many of the same ways that teachers do. It influences their learning and expands their audience beyond the teacher. By inviting other students in the classroom as well as the larger educational community to read their work, student writers are challenged to strengthen their rhetorical skills as they write for real audiences.

Book report alternatives are a wonderful way to introduce writing for other readers. Often one goal of a book report is to share information about the book in ways that will inspire others to read the book in the future. Traditional book reports can serve this purpose, but shifting to alternative forms of publication energizes the process for both readers and writers. Students can publish their book reports using any of these "Book Report Alternative" lesson plans:

- In "A Character's Letter to the Editor," students assume the persona of a character from a book that they have read and write a persuasive letter to the editor of a newspaper from that character's perspective, focusing on a specific issue or situation explored in the novel. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=930
- "Character and Author Business Cards" asks students to think symbolically as they make business cards for characters in books they've read or for the authors of those books. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=143
- By creating comic strips or cartoon squares featuring characters in books, students focus on crystallizing the significant points of the book in a few short scenes with the lesson "Comic Strips and Cartoon Squares." http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=195
- Students have three publication options in "Creating a Childhood for a Character": short stories, journal entries from the character, or time capsule letters. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=958
- "Creating Careers for Characters" asks students to find a job for characters in a book they have read and then to write application letters and resumes in the voice of the character. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=245
- In "Hooking a Reader with a Book Cover," students analyze their novel's cover and use an interactive tool to create a new cover. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=977

—Traci Gardner
www.readwritethink.org

or learning the conventions of submission. I offer here some basic advice for teachers who wish to write about their teaching for publication in a journal.

Examine models.

We wouldn't expect students to be able to write a poem without reading some poems first, any more than we would expect to meet an author of a novel who did not read widely and deeply in fiction. The same principle follows for teachers and journals: to join in a group conversation that is ongoing, we must first listen and understand what is being talked about and how. To internalize the conventions of a journal article well enough to write one, we must be attentive readers of the journal in question. Take a look at the journals you read regularly, those whose authors you can imagine sitting around a coffee table with. What are these people interested in? How do they tend to talk about the things that matter to them? How long are the articles? How do articles typically begin—with quotes from student work? With a classroom vignette? With a statement of a teaching problem or research question? What do articles include in terms of examples and evidence? Similarly, in looking at models, take care to look particularly at models written by classroom teachers. A few recent examples include the fine contributions teachers have made to collections like *Going Public with Our Teaching: An Anthology of Practice* (Hatch et al., 2005) or *Breakthroughs: Classroom Discoveries about Teaching Writing* (Bauman & Peterson, 2002). There are many, many more.

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The teachers who are most successful in publishing are those who involve themselves deeply in the activities of the field—attending and even presenting at conferences, seeking out professional development activities locally, and taking leadership roles. Seen from the perspective of an involved participant in the life of the language arts community, a journal like *Voices from the Middle* is simply a printed extension of an existing conversation rather than a new and intimidating milieu.

Form or join a writing group.

We need response just as much as student writers do. Writing groups can help you improve any kind of writing, but writing groups for teachers trying to publish are especially important, not only in improving the piece of writing itself but also in fostering the professional development benefits described above (Whitney, 2008, 2009b). Writing groups act as surrogates for the piece's intended audience—they help you to see which parts of your story your readers most want to hear, and they mirror back to you whether they can understand what you are saying in a piece.

Almost every time I take a draft to my own writing group, I find that members of the group can not only respond to what I wrote, but also articulate what I *didn't* write but should have—they help me to make explicit points that I had embedded or buried or implied. Whereas I have to write my way into what I think, taking many turns along the way, they can read the finished draft, see it as a whole, and discern what the *central* point is with a clear perspective. This mirroring function leads to the second important benefit of the writing group—they mirror not only the developing article but also *me*, the developing writer. Seeing how far I have come, they urge me forward, prompting me to see my work as valuable and helping me both to examine what I am writing about more critically and to engage in inquiry and writing more confidently.

Respond to calls.

I can be a shy person. At a party or a large meeting, I sometimes find it difficult to walk up to a group of people I don't know well and insert myself into their conversation. So I remain on the margins, sipping my drink or shuffling my papers until someone notices me and invites me over. While the conversation going on in professional journals might seem like a conversation among an

unfamiliar group at a party, in fact a warm invitation has already been extended to you. Each issue of *Voices from the Middle*, for example, includes a new "Call for Manuscripts" in which articles are invited on a particular theme. (Most journals include similar invitations either in each issue or on their websites.) If you've been unsure of how to enter the conversation, this call is a good place to start, like a circle of partygoers opening up space and gesturing for you to join in. Treat these like writing assignments, the same kind you offer students. You might begin in the same ways you ask students to begin: after reading the latest call, spend fifteen minutes in a focused freewrite and see what comes to mind. Try listing or sketching your responses to the questions posed in a call.

Find professional development opportunities that encourage teachers to write.

Two organizations have particularly strong traditions of supporting writing and publication among teachers of language arts. They serve as great examples of how community can make a difference. The first is the National Writing Project (NWP; www.nwp.org). This group has a more than 30-year tradition of engaging teachers in mutual professional development and sustained writing in a teachers-teaching-teachers format. In NWP Summer Institutes held at over 200 university-based sites around the country and beyond, teachers spend time on personal and professional writing as well as demonstrations and discussion of classroom practices. NWP sites also offer ongoing professional development, work in partnership with school districts, and conduct research with a network of teacher-leaders. All told, NWP activities have led to the publication of hundreds, if not thousands, of articles and books by teachers, both in its own publications and in outside journals and presses.

Another professional development context where teacher writing has played an important role is the Bread Loaf School of English (www.middlebury.edu/academics/blse/). A program of Middlebury College, Bread Loaf offers a summer Master's program in English that is popular among teachers. It is also home to the Bread Loaf Teacher Network (BLTN), a community of teachers who collaborate in the summer and online across the academic year using Breadnet, an online networking tool. In its 15-year history, BLTN members have published dozens of books and articles, and BLTN also publishes its own magazine.

There are many more. For example, many school–university partnerships or professional development schools incorporate teacher inquiry groups. A number of school reform models also feature critical friends groups and other structures to support teacher research. Other teacher-authors partner with student teachers and their university teacher education programs in teacher-research projects. You don't need to be part of a professional development network to conduct research in your classroom, but incorporating teacher research into your professional development plans can support and challenge you as you look systematically at what is happening in your classroom. Writing is both a potential tool and a potential outcome of that inquiry.

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Opening the Door

Moving toward publication is like the opening of a series of doors. One door opens out from the classroom to welcome colleagues in. Another opens into the discourse of the field to welcome the teacher-writer. Like any transition, stepping through these doors is not without challenges, but doing so offers the promise of professional development as a writer and teacher.

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Search for New Editor of *Language Arts*

NCTE is seeking a new editor of *Language Arts*. In July 2011, the term of the present editors (Patricia Enciso, Laurie Katz, Barbara Z. Kiefer, Detra Price-Dennis, and Melissa Wilson) will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received **no later than August 7, 2009.** Letters should include the applicant's vision for the journal and be accompanied by the applicant's vita, one sample of published writing, and two letters of general support from appropriate administrators at the applicant's institution. Do not send books, monographs, or other materials that cannot be easily copied for the Search Committee. Classroom teachers are both eligible and encouraged to apply. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2011. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be addressed to Kurt Austin, *Language Arts* Search Committee, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Questions regarding any aspect of the editorship should be directed to Kurt Austin, Publications Division Director: kaustin@ncte.org; (800) 369-6283, extension 3619.