

Dawn Hogue

Internetworking: Professional Development through Online Connections

High school teacher Dawn Hogue details the assistance she received from others on the NCTE-Talk listserv in her creation of Web-based classroom instruction and shows the value of informal, online professional development.

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he principal led me to my first classroom. It was filled with ripped-down ceiling tiles and littered with debris, and there were no desks for students.

He told me I would find all the materials I needed in the filing cabinet. A quick peek revealed an empty cavern there. Other than my teaching schedule, I had books but nothing else. Since I had been hired only two days before school began and everyone was scrambling to get things back in

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order from the asbestos removal during the summer, there was little help from other faculty. I remember that a science teacher told me how to get an overhead projector.

Others came by to say hello. But essentially I was on my own. When I did meet my department chair, I sensed that I did not meet her approval at all. I later learned that she was upset that school officials had not consulted her in my hiring. She eventually was a tremendous help, but I certainly would not call it mentoring. She had things to do, too. And so it began, my process of becoming a teacher. At age thirty-five, facing my first year of teaching, I stood in that classroom too naïve to be daunted by being alone.

More than Mentoring

The need for strong mentors has received more professional attention since I first began teaching thirteen years ago. Tied to recent changes in teacher certification in our state, the mentoring component is now an

integral part of teacher development and evaluation in my district. But mentoring alone is not enough to ensure continued teacher development. Teachers must be supported by a network of content-area colleagues who will challenge us to grow. For me, this support network came online via the NCTE-Talk listserv.

Ironically, it was not because I recognized the need for a supportive collegial environment that I first accessed NCTE-Talk. I went there looking for points of view regarding a question for my master's thesis. I found those, but I also found something unexpected—the collective wisdom of some of the best teachers in our profession. The discussions I eagerly joined introduced me to teachers who inspired me. I have been a fairly active member of this list for more than three years now, and to say that the experience has changed me is an understatement. Because of my connection with this community, I believe that I have become the teacher I was born to be. Without these people, I would have stayed in the place I was before I met them.

Because of discussions on the list, I began to question everything I did in my classroom. “Why am I doing what I’m doing?” was always an important question to me, but suddenly I was consumed by it. I “listened to” and engaged in discussions about pedagogy and practice ranging from teaching grammar to the five-paragraph essay. Key words started jumping out at me: *mandala*, *multigenre*, *constructivism*, *Web-based instruction*, *hypertext*, and more. I realized that there were teachers whose classrooms looked drastically different from mine. These were ideas and concepts that were not being discussed in

my district or at schools in our area as far as I knew. I began to feel as if there had been serious lapses in my education as an English teacher.

Initially, the discussions on NCTE-Talk compelled me to read. I devoured my *English Journal*, ordered copies of books that were recommended on the listserv, and started to understand the vastness of this chasm that I had chosen to cross. Still, new online colleagues were supportive and encouraging.

Seeing for Myself

Then I experienced the single most transformative event of my teaching career. I had gone to New York for a journalism conference at Columbia University and taken a side trip to Murry Bergtraum High School to visit Ted Nellen and his Cyber English class. The March wind swirled snow on the streets, but inside, as I listened to Ted talk about all the hows and whys of Cyber English, I started to see myself in his place, my students instead of his. That day I saw students in a truly helpful and supportive environment engaged in and excited about writing. And I listened as these students willingly talked about how computers had made a difference in their learning. Had I never met Ted Nellen on NCTE-Talk or been curious about what Web-based instruction meant, I never would have pursued the next step, which was to approach my administrators about creating a Cyber English class. With their enthusiastic approval and assistance, I wrote a Technology Literacy Challenge Fund grant proposal. The proceeds from the grant have helped me prepare my students for a technologically complex world.

I would hope a visitor to my class now would come away with some of the same impressions I had when I visited Ted. However, my class is not exactly the same as his. For one thing, his students were juniors, and I felt strongly about plunging ninth-grade students into an integration of English and technology so that they would be able to build on their skills in all classes throughout high school. In this way, CyberEnglish9 has been successful. My students keep a cyberjournal to reflect on how using computers in English affects how they learn. I had hoped that adding Web technology to reading and writing instruction would assist students in integrating all learning experiences. I thought computers might help students make the transition from concrete, linear thinking to

abstract thinking and multitasking. Many of them are beginning to feel confident in this sense.

Elizabeth wrote recently in her cyberjournal:

I have learned so many things about a computer, and how to do things on a computer this year so far. Writing papers for other classes, and English, has been a lot easier since I have been in this English class. For Biology, we had to do a really big research project on a virus. Being in this English class taught me how to do research, and take notes on what I was able to find. I learned how to go to search engines, and other sources to find information. Since I have already done the Biology research project, I think that I am going to feel more comfortable doing the Multi-Genre web project for English. I have another big project/presentation coming up for Agriculture. Now that I know how to use a lot of things on the computer, well more than I use [*sic*] to, I will be able to do research on my topic. Being in this English class has helped me a lot.

I would not say that all of my students are suddenly outstanding writers. We still have a lot to work on. But there does seem to be more concern for the quality of their writing than I have seen in the past. I learned from my NCTE-Talk peers that publishing student writing on the Web makes it public, expanding the audience to include potentially anyone, but probably parents, other teachers, and peers. At the beginning of the year, I explain this to my students. I try to get them to see that, in this class, they are no longer writing just for me. They are writing for everyone. What I want them to do eventually is to produce writing that they care about and that they are proud to publish. Web publishing also takes the secrecy away from students who do a lazy job and toss a poor paper in the trash. There is no trash. It is precisely because writing published on the Web stays “alive” that revising becomes a logical need.

“Being in this class I have become more confident in my writing and computer skills,” says Emily. She believes:

Having a web page is a lot of work. Something that comes along with the web page is all the writing.

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Without the writing there wouldn't be much of a web page. Also you need to have good computer skills. If you had no interest and no skills what so ever you would have some major problems trying to write and create a web page. In the beginning of the year I would say I new [*sic*] a lot about computers, or at least thought I did, now I would say that I learned so much more and my skills have improved. To be honest coming in to high school I wasn't the best writer. I wouldn't say I am the best writer now but I think I have improved greatly. Having a web page helps you to improve these skills.

Multifaceted Online Collegiality

While the look of my classroom has changed significantly over the past two years, I am still struggling with many of the concerns all English teachers have. I want to find effective ways to help students become more literate, not only in reading and writing but also in technology. My online peers continue to enrich me with their ideas. And yet, because of how I have changed, I now find that I am someone others look to for example and guidance.

Pat Schulze of Yankton, South Dakota, is a good example. Pat has more experience teaching English than I have, but she is one of those marvelous colleagues who continues to challenge herself and her students. This past year, through grants, Pat transformed a composition class into CyberComp. The hub of her course instruction is her

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teacher Web page, which she modeled after pages created by Ted Nellen and by me. She saw how the Web approach could be used and pushed forward to find ways to make it happen. Then she made adjustments to fit her curriculum and her particular needs. As I borrowed from Ted's ideas, Pat borrowed from mine, but all of us have individual approaches to Web-based instruction.

As online colleagues, Pat and I do more than serve as models for one another. We use the Web to talk about our shared experiences. Pat started a blog for us to record our thoughts and to discuss problems. We decided this online journal was a good way for us to communicate, using the technology we had embraced for our students. We also wanted

to keep a record of this experience to use later for articles or reports.

While most teachers are familiar with one-to-one mentoring between teachers or students, using the Internet can enrich—and complicate—such relationships. An example of multileveled, online mentoring is a Web pal project that involves university and high school faculty and students in two states. I “met” Angelo Bonadonna from Saint Xavier University in Chicago through Megan Hughes, his former student and my NCTE-Talk colleague. Megan knew of my interest in an email pen pal exchange and she hooked us up. Students in Angelo's Teaching of Writing course are Web pals for my students. The overall goal is for the pairs of Web pals to discuss writing. Since nearly all of the writing my students have done is published on their Web pages, it is easy for Angelo's students to see what their high school Web pal has done.

The experiment, so far, has been well worth the effort it took in development. I had originally received the idea of cybermentors from Ted Nellen, who enlisted the services of teachers and adults all over the country to work with his scholars at Murry Bergtraum High School. One young woman was emailing her cybermentor from Marquette University on the day I visited. The two had developed a great relationship via the Internet, adult mentoring youth, and they were discussing the student's Web page. I thought this also could be a valuable experience for my students. Students often respond more openly to criticisms about their writing from their Web pal than they do from me. My students like talking to a college student; they are pleased that someone outside school is looking at their Web page and helping them improve their writing. The preservice teachers have the experience of getting to know a real student. Most of us go into teaching with a sort of vague idea about what students will be like, so the chance to develop a relationship like this is a great advantage to beginning teachers.

As an extension of this experiment, Angelo set up two listservs; one is for the teachers involved in the experiment (his students are also working with students from a school in his area), and the second is for all of the Teaching of Writing students to converse, but the teachers have been invited to listen in and respond as well. Again, the beauty of the In-

ternet is that it effortlessly facilitates dialogue among people who share common interests and goals, even though they may never meet. I probably would not have seen these online possibilities were it not for NCTE-Talk.

Inspired to Innovate

The relationships I have built through NCTE-Talk have strengthened my teaching and have also provided me with tools to help others in the building and district achieve their teaching goals. For example, CyberEnglish9 is no longer a pilot program; it is how we teach ninth-grade English. Our English department is moving toward integrating a Web approach at all levels. And, as I talk about CyberEnglish9 at conferences or show teachers in my school or in my classes on Web page development how a cyber approach can work, they start talking and thinking that maybe a similar approach could work for them, too.

I use two Web pages for teaching. One is exclusively for my ninth graders and their parents (<http://www.sheboyganfalls.k12.wi.us/cyberenglish9/index.htm>). The other serves the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition class and the journalism class (<http://www.sheboyganfalls.k12.wi.us/staff/dehogue/index.htm>). The second page is also the portal to department information. At first, I saw my Web pages simply as tools for teaching and as places where students and their parents could go to understand unit objectives, view assignment due dates, or see examples of student work. I had no idea that these pages would become a source of ideas and help for other teachers, but teachers and parents from all over the country who have seen my Web pages request permission to use what they see there or adapt a lesson. From my mentor Ted Nellen, I learned that what I publish on my Web page is there for anyone to use any time. Sometimes they want to talk about lesson ideas or how I got started. The Web pages now serve to continue the conversations from NCTE-Talk that inspired me.

Of course, being where I am now would not have been possible had I not stumbled into that electronic teachers lounge where the wisest and the most inexperienced together talk about teaching English. I revel in the energy that exists on this list even after years of talking. It is as if no one ever tires of dis-

cussing good teaching or debating the best practices in teaching reading and writing.

Mentoring in an Electronic Teachers Lounge

As I considered the influence of NCTE-Talk on my practice and curriculum, I wondered if others had also experienced changes. So last year I posted the question, "How has this list changed you?" The replies attest to the value of online mentoring in its various incarnations.

This list is like no other according to Howard Miller, who belongs to half a dozen such lists. He believes that "NCTE-Talk is by far the best, the most active, the most interesting, the most fun, and the most supportive." For Nancy Patterson, "the power of the Internet is its ability to increase our human dialogue, to interact with more texts, more stories, more people than we ever have in history. This list is a powerful example of that dialogue." Nancy also writes that most of her "face to face friends and colleagues (even my new university faculty colleagues) have never understood my addiction to the list. They tell me they would never find the time for so much email, that they wouldn't know how to manage it, or that all the names on the screen would be faceless and they could never get involved with faceless names. I've never been able to make the argument that managing the volume is just another literacy skill . . . and that the people on this list are far from faceless/nameless entities."

I have no doubt that this list is one of the best ways a young (or not-so-young) English teacher becomes great. The discussions we engage in present us with ideas that take us to places that compel us to try things. They connect us with people who are also doing what we do, who know about conferences where we can meet someone who understands just exactly what we are doing. Before we know it, we are speaking at a national convention or writing an article or even a book. It is internetworking.

Ted Nellen can attest to that. He writes, "I recall in 1994, I posted to this list and ACW that I was going to start CyberEnglish. Within two hours I heard from Wayne Butler, then at one of the

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Michigan schools with Bill Condon and Becky Rickley. He opened my eyes to what they were doing and in short order I was in contact with many of the icons of using the computer in the English classroom. It was Wayne who invited me to participate in my first NCTE all-day workshop in Boston with Stephen Marcus, Trevor Owen, Beverly Wall, Winifred Wood, and Robert Yagelski. That correspondence altered my life as a teacher and gave me a second chance and renewed my choice to be a teacher.”

Many of us make NCTE-Talk part of our daily lives. Patricia Edmondson says, “I . . . feel the list has made me a better planner due to the quality of the resources here. I needed continued collaboration among the English gentry after college, and this list has provided a place to check in daily whether I comment or just listen. It has helped me out in a pinch when I’m brain drained and out of ideas. Sometimes there have been professional opportunities that have come my way through the list. And yes, a place to vent. It is so helpful to get the support this list has to offer when the going gets ridiculous sometimes. The ‘I have been there’s’ and ‘here’s some advice’ is absolutely priceless and a dear, dear part of this cyberexperience.”

Lori Mayo was educated to believe in the importance of being in as many professional conversations as possible, and for her “the list was a place to

turn when my study group dissolved. It is a constant reminder to me of basic important ideas that sometimes get lost in the day to day. It has reminded me of what a wonderful tool writing is as

we all use this space to think through ideas. It has reminded me of how important it is to collaborate as we work together to ask questions, make sense of things, share ideas. It has reminded me that there are ways to phrase things, especially in something as hard to read as email, that promote discussion rather than end it (still working on that one).”

Many times discussions get us thinking in different ways. Robin McDermott remembers “the first issue I was bold enough to raise with this list. . . . I asked about five-paragraph essays. Oh my goodness, how the floodgates opened! I was shocked at the debate that ensued, but it opened my eyes (and mind) to the possibilities and methodologies of teaching writing. I think that because of this list,

I’m more of a risk taker in my classroom now. I’m willing to try new ideas and new approaches and new works whereas before I was pretty much in a safe little rut.”

Stacie Valdez believes “the list pumped new life into my career. Seven or eight years ago, I was stagnating—not quite to the burnt-out-crispy stage but close. I joined the list and lurked for a long time. The ideas and exchanges gave me energy to try new approaches. The professional development books that I’ve read since joining the list are too many to count. I am ten times a better teacher now than I was a decade ago. Of course, I’m never real sure how glad my principal feels about this fact. I think he liked the more passive me. I have eight more years until retirement and can’t imagine surviving those years without this list.”

This community was even more important to Kristi Kattelus. “Without the list, I would not still be an English teacher,” she says. “I even left the profession after my first year because it was so intimidating, but I missed all the researching and creating and reading and writing. . . . Without this list I would have become one of those worksheet-and-questions-at-the-end-of-the-story teachers for lack of encouragement to keep trying what really does work. I would have run out of creativity at the end of my second year. And now I am moving to try to get some grants to help furnish my classroom with books for the kids to read. I really rely on this list for my inspiration and encouragement, even if I don’t ask for it.”

Dorothy Sprengel wonders how “English teachers survive w/o such a resource as NCTE-Talk . . . without such a professional family as the talkies [what we call ourselves] . . . without the daily doses of humor, wit, and inspiration [they] provide. Certainly, if it wouldn’t result in an unwieldy volume, all Eng. teachers should be required to participate. But probably, the ‘powers’ pray nightly that this doesn’t happen.”

Fundamental Differences

These days, my room has the look of one who has been there awhile. There is the U-shaped arrangement of desks that I decided on during my second year of teaching. There are my framed posters—J.F.K., Mark Twain, whales, flowers—art from old calendars, shelves and shelves of books, dried flow-

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ers and eucalyptus, gifts from students, and faded remnants of earlier days. Physically, I would say I am entrenched in my space. I am comfortable surrounded by the things that reflect my philosophies and my interests. I add new things all the time, but a former student who came to visit me the other day remarked about how little things had changed.

And yet what that student did not notice was the cart full of laptop computers that stays plugged in at the back of the room. He did not point out the Web address of our class that I had stenciled across the back wall (just as Ted Nellen had done). He could not have imagined twenty-seven students researching, writing, and making Web pages almost simultaneously. What he could not see in me, beyond my shorter, blonder hair, was that I am fundamentally different from the person he knew more

NCTE-TALK

NCTE-Talk has changed from a listserv to a bulletin board format and, because of problems with the server in the summer, some of the archives were lost. As we go to press, staff members are attempting to restore the archives where you could read the entire discussion that is excerpted in this article. For updates, check at <http://www.ncte.org> and at *EJ* on the Web, <http://www.englishjournal.colostate.edu>.

than five years ago. He could not see how the rich diversity of the NCTE-Talk online teachers lounge has energized, excited, and driven me to grow and learn and become someone I never thought I'd be.

Dawn Hogue teaches English and advises the yearbook at Sheboygan Falls High School in Wisconsin. Her CyberEnglish9 Web address is www.sheboyganfalls.k12.wi.us/cyberenglish9/index.htm. From there you can link to both Ted Nellen's page and Pat Schulze's cybercomp Web page. *email*: dehogue@sheboyganfalls.k12.wi.us.

EJ 15 Years Ago

Years of Experience

A long time ago, when I was doing my student teaching, my supervising teacher told me what is probably an old joke (although I'd never heard it before): many teachers who say they've had ten or fifteen years of experience have really only had the same experience ten or fifteen times.

Bill Martin. "Becoming Students to Become Better Teachers." *EJ* 77.4 (1988): 41-44.