Toward Online Participation as Teacher Leadership

Luke Rodesiler, Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne: NCTE member since 2004

Describing the efforts of teachers in a writing group, Whitney and Badiali (2010) made a case for "writing as leadership" (p. 3). As the authors explained it, writing was an act of leadership because as teachers wrote for local newspapers and professional journals they were taking responsibility for engaging in conversations about issues relevant to their work as educators. The teachers described were exercising their influence by sharing their insights and expertise, adding their knowledge and perspectives to public conversations about teaching and learning.

Since Whitney and Badiali described teachers writing for newspapers and journals as leadership back in 2010, the ubiquity of online technologies (e.g., blogs, microblogs, and social network sites) has only increased, leading scholars to push for teachers advancing their own digital literacy practices (e.g., Hicks & Turner, 2013) and forcing school districts to develop social media policies to govern teachers' online participation (Rodesiler, 2017). Today, many teachers are forgoing publishers, sidestepping newspaper editors, and asserting their influence by participating online, writing for immediate publication on the Web, and broadcasting their ideas, reflections, and instructional methods to an immediate and worldwide audience. Using interactive online technologies, teachers are capitalizing on multimodal affordances to open virtual windows to their classrooms and drawing from their teaching experiences to provoke thought among and support the practices of their peers at a distance (Rodesiler, 2014). Such efforts, I contend, also constitute teacher leadership.

In the context of this article, I recognize *leadership* not as the product of a formal appointment in a top-down, authority-driven model but, like Lambert and colleagues (2002), as a reciprocal process embraced by those who see the need or the opportunity. This vision of leadership is not about rigid and unchanging hierarchies; instead it promotes the boundaries of leadership as porous and flexible, allowing teachers to carry out acts of leadership as they see fit and as they are able. Additionally, for the purposes of this article, I recognize English teachers' *online participation* as the creation of new content on the Web in exploration of issues at the center of an English teacher's work: teaching, learning, and literacy. Over the course of this article I aim to make a case for online participation as teacher leadership by presenting three distinct acts of leadership evinced in a subset of online artifacts generated by select secondary English language arts teachers who are active online.

Background

The data presented in this article were collected during follow-up to research designed to explore secondary English teachers' online participation. Originally aiming to understand the features of the online contexts teachers weave (Rodesiler, 2014), the nature of their online participation (Rodesiler, 2015), and the ways they experience such participation (Rodesiler & Pace, 2015), I followed up with teachers from the initial project, collected teacher-generated online artifacts, including posts generated via blogs, microblogs, and social network sites, and conducted multiple semi-structured interviews. For the purposes of this article, I have drawn from a content analysis of collected artifacts to document three acts of leadership embedded in the routine online participation of English teachers in the study: (a) making teaching practices public; (b) speaking out on topical issues in education; and (c) creating platforms for others.

Going public with teaching practices, letting outsiders have a view of the instructional methods teachers employ, the texts they use, and the ways they foster literacy learning is an approach scholars advocate.

Making Teaching Practices Public

Going public with teaching practices, letting outsiders have a view of the instructional methods teachers employ, the texts they use, and the ways they foster literacy learning is an approach scholars advocate (e.g., Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2010). In addition to inviting potentially valuable feedback from other professionals, making teaching practices public on the Web stands to inform various constituents' views about the shape effective literacy instruction might take (Fleischer, 2016). And the importance of challenging narrow conceptions of literacy teaching and learning cannot be understated in a time when accountability for many teachers has been reduced to improving students' test scores (Kosnik & Rowsell, 2013). Fortunately, then, many teachers are

Copyright © 2018 by the National Council of Teachers of English. All rights reserved.

As an act of leadership, making teaching practices public online stands to inform literacy teaching and learning in classrooms far and wide.

seizing opportunities to share online the efforts they make to advance literacy learning in their respective teaching contexts.

Specific examples of teachers from the study intentionally making their practices public while participating online are plentiful. In one instance, Sarah, a high school English teacher in the Midwestern United States, crafted a blog post showcasing a creative approach to fostering a reading community that extends beyond the walls of the classroom: literacy lockers (student lockers adorned with the cover image of each book students read that year). As Sarah explained in her post, sharing her own reading life via a classroom-door collage featuring the cover of each book she had read that year helped to spark conversations with students about reading and the books they enjoy. That experience coupled with reflections on a presentation she attended at a state-level reading conference got Sarah thinking, as she noted in her post: "How cool would it be if my students were able to publicly display their reading lives?" Sarah continued the post by describing how she invited students to participate in the initiative, located and printed images of book covers that would adorn students' lockers, and received feedback from students about the new hallway decor before explaining her vision:

> Ultimately, I hope these literacy lockers will spark discussion amongst the students in the hall. It's my hope that a friend of one of my students will see one of the book covers and ask about the book and if he/she should read it. I'm hoping more of my boys in class will want to do this now because I've only had one boy participate so far. [Literacy scholar] William Brozo was at [a state-level reading conference] and spoke about the importance of every school being proud of its reading culture and making it obvious throughout the school. This is a small step in that direction, but it's one that I hope will grow.

Based on the positive feedback Sarah received from readers of her blog, it quickly became evident that the literacy lockers concept was one that other teachers were eager to implement.

Participants in the study consistently shared teaching practices online during the data collection period, offering insights about practices that ranged from facilitating a school-wide writing program using daily journals in a creative writing class and engaging students in authentic writing experiences via college application essays to selecting read-alouds for secondary classrooms, microblogging with middle school students, and crafting five-image visual stories. As an act of leadership, making teaching practices public online stands to inform literacy teaching and learning in classrooms far and wide.

Speaking Out on Topical Issues in Education

In the face of dispiriting and disenfranchising educational reform efforts driven by legislators, philanthropists, and lobbyists, teachers' writing increasingly takes the shape of activism and resistance (Whitney, Hicks, Zuidema, Fredricksen, & Yagelski, 2014). Despite the risk that their public words will become the next target for "hateful anonymous commenters . . . [who] say whatever they wish with no accountability or consequence" (Smagorinsky, 2015, p. 93), teachers are joining the fray and sharing their informed perspectives and experiences. Like educators who demonstrate leadership by addressing in local newspapers issues relevant to a teacher's daily work, many teachers are performing acts of leadership by speaking out on topical issues in education as they generate new content on the Web, be it via blogs, microblogs, or other digital media.

With a blog post examining national standards, Brian, a middle school teacher in the Northeastern United States, provided one example of teachers adding their voices to public conversations about education. As Brian explained in the post, he had grown frustrated with the limited attention digital literacy received in national standards. He argued that, given the growing role digital technologies play in daily life, a greater emphasis should be placed on digital texts and digital literacy practices in national standards and, subsequently, in today's classrooms:

> As digital literacy provides access to information—and access to power—this Digital Renaissance exposes the haves and the have-nots in our country. While education must always remain pedagogy-driven, society's immersion in technology cannot be ignored by educators.

Brian continued the post by problematizing the absence of digital literacy in national standards, challenging administrators to support teachers' efforts to advance digital literacy, and reminding teachers that one's own digital literacy practices inform classroom instruction. Whether or not readers agree with Brian's contentions, his post invited others to consider a host of important issues in education—national standards, the digital divide, meaningful technology integration, and what counts as literacy, among others—and their stances on each.

As they participated online, teachers in the study spoke out about topics tied closely to their work as educators, including curriculum decision-making, professional development, and the deprofessionalization of teaching. In doing so, they took on the responsibility of adding their voices to conversations that all too often seem to be dominated by those outside the field of education. Scholars continue to challenge the dismissal of teachers' knowledge and experiences (e.g., Brass, 2014; Hochstetler, Letcher, Jeffers, Warrington, & Buescher, 2016; Moni, Thein, & Brindley, 2014), and they are not alone; practicing teachers are performing acts of leadership online as they speak out on topical issues and assert their voices in public conversations about issues relevant to teaching, learning, and literacy.

Creating Platforms for Others

Leadership is not simply ensuring that your voice rings loudest. Rather, as Lambert and colleagues (2002) describe it, leadership encompasses helping others find their voices. In a similar vein, some teachers participate online in ways that create platforms for other educators to let their voices be heard. For example, Meenoo, who was teaching high school English in the Northeastern United States at the time of the study, brought together other teachers, encouraging them to share their practices online during #engchat, a weekly Twitter chat. Meeting virtually on Mondays at 7:00 PM (EST), #engchat was designed for individuals with a shared interest in the teaching of English.

Meenoo founded the weekly Twitter chat, but she also took a democratic approach to it, welcoming English teachers nationwide to serve as guest moderators and giving them a platform to facilitate the exploration of specific topics of interest to them. She explained:

> One of the smartest things that I did was I took myself out of the model so it wasn't every single week I'd be moderating or I would be hosting. I mean, I do what good teachers do, which is take themselves out of the picture. They make it about the students or the participants. So I said, "Every week I'm going to find the best person, whether they have a lot of followers or not. Who are the . . . English teachers who are doing some really interesting things?"

Meenoo followed that model as she welcomed a host of English teachers, teacher educators, and authors to draw upon their areas of interest and serve as moderators of #engchat. Guest moderators took the lead, facilitating the exploration of various topics, including assessment in the English classroom, elevating student writing, studying the events of 9/11, and establishing classrooms as safe learning spaces.

Teachers participating in the study also used group blogs to create platforms for others to speak up and speak out about literacy-related issues that resonate with them. *The Nerdy Book Club* is one such example. As one of multiple facilitators for the blog, Cindy, a high school English teacher in the Northeastern United States, helped to provide a platform for teachers, librarians, and readers more generally to write for a wide audience and to share and celebrate their literacy experiences on the Web. Similar opportunities for teachers to share their voices by contributing to a group blog about issues in education are made available by the organizers of *Teachers, Profs, Parents: Writers Who Care*.

Conclusion

As documented here, the Web offers teachers multiple and varied avenues for exercising their influence and inviting others to do the same. Like Whitney and Badiali (2010), Dawson (2016), Shannon (1995), and other scholars, I see the value in teachers writing for publication, and I recognize that refereed journals help to ensure a level of quality in thought and word that cannot be replaced by self-published works that aren't subjected to a rigorous peer-review process. Still, I contend that writing books and journal articles is but one avenue through which teachers can assert their influence. More immediately, teachers can leverage the affordances of the Web to share valuable instructional methods, to speak out on issues pertaining to their work as educators, and to help others find their voices and connect with teachers at a distance. And, in doing so, teachers can extend their reach beyond the building or district level while moving toward a model of leadership that values reciprocity and teacher expertise. ●

Join the conversation!
@rodesiler
rodesill@ipfw.edu

References

Brass, J. (2014). Reconstituting teacher education: Literacy, critical theories, and English. In J. Brass & A. Webb (Eds.), *Reclaiming English language arts methods courses: Critical issues and challenges for teacher educators in top-down times* (pp. 1–21). New York, NY: Routledge.

Dawson, C. M. (2016). *The teacher-writer: Creating writing groups for personal and professional growth*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Fleischer, C. (2016). Everyday advocacy: The new professionalism for teachers. *Voices from the Middle*, *24*(1), 19–23.

Hicks, T., & Turner, K. H. (2013). No longer a luxury: Digital literacy can't wait. *English Journal*, *102*(6), 58–65.

Hochstetler, S., Letcher, M., Jeffers, L., Warrington, A., & Buescher, E. (2016). "The biggest surprise was the feeling of empowerment": Teachers sharing stories for advocacy and transformation. *Voices from the Middle*, *24*(1), 44–47.

Kosnik, C., & Rowsell, J. (2013). The shifting landscape of literacy teacher education: Working with integrity, commitment, skill, and vision. In C. Kosnik, J. Rowsell, P. Williamson, R. Simon, & C. Beck (Eds.), *Literacy teacher educators: Preparing student teachers for a changing world* (pp. 191–204). Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Lambert, L., Walker, D., Zimmerman, D.P., Cooper, J.E., Lambert, M.D., Gardner, M.E., & Szabo, M. (2002). *The constructivist leader* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Lieberman, A., & Pointer Mace, D. (2010). Making practice public: Teacher learning in the 21st Century. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *61*(1-2), 77–88.

Moni, K., Thein, A. H., & Brindley, S. (2014). English curriculum in the current moment: Tensions between policy and professionalism. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, *13*(1), 1–7.

Rodesiler, L. (2014). Weaving contexts of participation online: The digital tapestry of secondary English teachers. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, *14*(2), 72–100. Retrieved from http://www.citejournal.org/vol14/iss2/languagearts/article1.cfm

Rodesiler, L. (2015). The nature of selected English teachers' online participation. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *59*(1), 31–40.

Rodesiler, L. (2017). Local social media policies governing teachers' professionally oriented participation online: A content analysis. *TechTrends*, *61*(3), 293–300.

Rodesiler, L., & Pace, B. G. (2015). English teachers' online participation as professional development: A narrative study. *English Education*, *47*(4), 347–378.

Shannon, P. (1995). Kissing and telling, teaching and writing. *The Reading Teacher*, *48*, 464–466.

Smagorinsky, P. (2015). Speaking out in the public sphere: Why, what, where, and how teachers can enter the fray. *English Journal*, *104*(3), 91–96.

Whitney, A. E., & Badiali, B. (2010). Writing as teacher leadership. *English Leadership Quarterly, 33*(2), 2–3.

Whitney, A. E., Hicks, T., Zuidema, L., Fredricksen, J. E., & Yagelski, R. P. (2014). Teacher-writers: Then, now, and next. *Research in the Teaching of English*, *49*(2), 177–184.