

Pursuing Inquiry in a Collaborative Space

The Teachers' Loft

Reflection By Karen Woods

In the summer of 2006, I was sitting with a friend from graduate school. She mentioned to me an article she saw in the paper about a place called The Teachers' Loft. We both agreed to support our work in the classroom. I looked into the group and began going to meetings that September. At the time I was teaching grade 1 for the first time, at a charter school that was in its first year. The support I got, and the level of professionalism I felt at The Teachers' Loft, was extraordinary.

Every other Tuesday I was able to come together with other first year teachers, discuss any problems I was having, highlight my successes, and get feedback. As the year went on, members of The Teachers' Loft observed me in my classroom and made time to meet with me on one to evaluate my routines, strategies, and instruction. It was this group that helped me to make it through my first year of teaching with the confidence that I could continue to teach.

I engaged in an inquiry project that year: How can I successfully build community in an urban, first grade classroom? This research not only aided me as a teacher, but was something I did with my students that helped us to grow as a classroom of learners. I had a specialist teacher tell me there was something special about this group and that he would really miss them. I believe that my work through this inquiry project, as well as my journey as a first year teacher, is part of what made that group of children so special as a community.

Recently, I found out I will be moving out of the Pioneer Valley to work at a school in the eastern part of the state. One of the things I will miss most is The Teachers' Loft. I am grateful I was able to work with dedicated and inspiring teachers during the past two years, who have helped me professionally in my learning and teaching. We are fortunate to have had the opportunity to come from different schools and work together. This would not have been made possible without The Teachers' Loft. I will take with me knowledge I have gained about the inquiry process and continue to research "burning questions" as I teach this year. (I already have some ideas.)

I want to take this opportunity to thank the founders, supporters, and members of The Teachers' Loft. The work done to support new teachers is imperative to the success of teachers during their first years in the classroom. Thank you and good luck with your work next year!



The Teachers' Loft

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Notes from the President

summer 2008

Dear Friends of The Teachers' Loft:

The Teachers' Loft is experiencing an exciting period of expansion as new opportunities present themselves. In January we met with Rachel Kuhn Daviau to do some strategic long term goal planning and setting. One of our goals was to find someone to take over Paige Bray's position as treasurer; another goal was to bring aboard an educational administrator to our Board of Directors. These two goals were quickly met. We happily welcome to our Board two new members: Damian Watson and Dr. Nettie Webb.

Damian was our first "new opportunity": he was looking for a worthy organization to which to donate some time and felt we were that organization. He serves as our new treasurer and brings a wealth of information and experience from his career as an accountant to help guide us through this new period and help us sustain steady growth. We are thrilled to have him and deeply appreciate the work he's already done.

Dr. Nettie Webb is a former classroom teacher, district language arts coordinator, and principal for 11 years of the Lee F. Jackson School in Greenburgh, New York. Dr. Webb is reknown in her district as someone who provided the support and tools teachers needed to be their best. She has been a fierce advocate for children's right to quality education whatever their background

and the economic status of their families. She was on the board that developed the National Professional Standards for teachers. We are so fortunate to have her wisdom, experience, and deep-searching intelligence.

We have completed our sixth year of facilitating beginning teacher groups. Our success can be measured by the number of teachers completing these groups who've asked to continue their work on critical pedagogy with The Teachers' Loft. We also received the exciting news that our program has been approved for a partnership with Western New England College in fostering an alternative route to teacher licensure. (Read Paige's TIMELI article on this further on in this newsletter.) The possibilities that this opens for our organization are simply astounding.

Finally, we thank all of our families and friends who have been so generous in their donations. Your emotional and financial support make possible the important work we do with teachers. In turn, by helping teachers to become reflective investigators of their own teaching practices, we help support children to become reflective learners and teachers themselves.

Melissa Heckler

The Board of Directors congratulates Dr. Paige Bray on the completion of her doctoral degree. We are especially proud that our founding directors, Dr. Jenn Cook and Dr. Paige Bray, continue to be active members of the Board of Directors. Dr. Cook teaches at Rhode Island College in Providence, RI. Dr. Bray will be teaching at the University of Connecticut in Hartford, Connecticut and continuing her work supporting new teachers through The Teachers' Loft.

The Teachers' Loft gratefully acknowledges these people who donated since our last newsletter:

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| Rose and Carl Appel | Sonia Nieto |
| Carol Berner | The Pankow Family |
| Jennifer Cook | Arielle Perry and Tricia Walker |
| Hedda Fields | Hal Portner |
| Sally Fillmore | Sue Schardt and Taylor Davis |
| Melissa Grossman | Arlene and Clem Seldin |
| Carol Hillman | |

It is our pleasure to name those loved ones and life events that our supporters choose to celebrate via a donation to our mission:

Gifts in memory of:

- Susan Anderson *in memory of* Len Anderson
- Vilma Bray *in memory of* Charles P. Bray
- Helen Finkler *in memory of* Tom Finkler
- Davis Goff *in memory of* Maureen H. Goff
- Kate Stephens *in memory of* Leonie Dunlap
- Susanna Walz *in memory of* Carl Walz

Gifts in honor of:

- Jennifer Cook *in honor of* all the folks continuing this good work!
- Amber Cote *in honor of* Paige finishing her doctorate
- Ron and Barbara DeLay *in honor of* Dr. Paige Bray
- Dawn Edgren *in honor of* Melissa Heckler
- Freela and Clifton Field *in honor of* my two great grandsons Benjamin and Saul
- Melissa Heckler *in honor of* the marriage of Carol Frankel and Ernie Straus as well as Nettie Webb
- Carol Hillman *in honor of* the marriage of Melissa and Rick
- Jennifer Kay and Stacy Wallach *in honor of* Melissa Heckler
- Rick and Sama Lawrence *in honor of* Timothy C. Lawrence
- Rick and Sama Lawrence *in honor of* Paige the Dr.
- Meg Lippert *in honor of* Dori Sears and Kate Sears, Stillpoint School, WA
- Sonia and Angel Nieto *in honor of* Alicia Lopez, my daughter and a teacher at Amherst Regional Middle School
- Ruth-Ellen and Dennis O'Loughlin *in honor of* Robert Maloy, School of Education, UMass
- Paige, Tim, Benjamin and Saul *in honor of* Melissa and Rick's marriage
- Paige M. Bray *in honor of* Valeska Blissenbach
- Robert A Pauker *in honor of* Hal and Mary Portner
- Mabe Poe *in honor of* my grandson Dillion
- Carol Shea *in honor of* Kathy Travers
- Nettie Webb *in honor of* Dr. Paige Bray
- Netie Webb *in honor of* Melissa and Rick's Marriage
- Kara and Joseph Wooten *in honor of* Edward and Mary Ann Wooten

Sustaining our Belief in Possibility
“The seed inside an apple’s heart is an orchard invisible.”
 – WELSH PROVERB

Throwing Teachers a Raft in These Turbulent Seas

The principles on which Paige & I founded The Teachers’ Loft are more crucial now than ever. Collaborative Talk, Guided Inquiry, the Gift of Time, and a Beautiful Loft Space continue to serve as the cornerstones of The Teachers’ Loft. And, teachers from the Pioneer Valley keep coming back to The Teachers’ Loft precisely for these things because these cornerstones--necessities for any reflective practitioner--are so rarely a part of a teacher’s work in schools today.

A typical beginning teacher in a public middle or high school has about 120 students with whom to work. This teacher generally faces a school day that is chaotic at worst and frenzied at best. Once upon a time, we might have focused on that number--120--as representative of the challenge public school teaching presents. Today, though, we have to look much deeper than the number of students each teacher is responsible for (though class sizes are no doubt at an all time high in our nation’s schools).

Today’s methodologies and institutionalized practices require that we see, know, and teach to each student as an individual. Each student has a story, a language, specialized literacies, a home culture, and an educational history that the teacher needs to learn and examine. 120 educational histories. 120 families and home cultures and backstories. 120 types of learners. 120 different strengths and weaknesses. 120 ways to differentiate a lesson to meet everyone’s needs. And this is just getting to know the audience! Throw in mastering the content, preparing to teach 5 courses a day, department meetings, faculty meetings, advisories, duties, special education protocols, and formal/informal mentoring, and there is rarely time left in a day for self care, reflection, or sustained professional talk.

This is the sea that teachers today are swimming in. We want to be able to continue to throw them a raft so that they can take a breath, examine their thoughts, and paddle forward to shore (not merely sink or swim, mind you!)

This is why the work we do at The Teachers’ Loft is so crucial--we invite teachers to stop and take a breath, to gather in a beautiful loft space to talk collaboratively about their classroom experience, to help each

“Ubungani” by Jami Witherall

Sitting in Women’s Studies 394H as a Senior in the Communication Program at UMASS, I had no idea that Professor Deschamps would give me the word that would come to define me not only as a teacher but also as a professional. My professor had recently had a conversation with a person of Swahili decent who had taught her the word, “ubungani.” “Ubungani”, she said again in her melodic Dominica accent, “is loosely translated into: Like pebbles in a stream, we polish one another.” As the lecture continued I had only one thought, “Ubungani is how I will teach one day.”

Coming out of the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the Collaborative Teacher Education Program, I had lived the life of cohort collaboration for an entire year. Our 18 person community was as close to a third space as I needed. Teachers gathering together each night in a classroom outside their own to discuss the day, things that worked, things that didn’t, gathering advice on how to make a stronger lesson, and advice on how to let things go or see the positives in even the worst day.

I have to be honest when I say leaving UMASS was freeing on one level as the excitement of having my very own classroom loomed in the fall and daunting on another level as the prospect of losing that 18 person, tight, intelligent unit seemed imminent. The summer faded quickly and soon I was teaching third grade in my very own classroom in the inner city of Holyoke, Massachusetts. It was, in a few words, the most overwhelming, life testing, soul growing, spirit filling first year that I think any teacher can ever expect to experience.

I had long since forgotten about the guest speaker and the fliers relaying the information for and details about this “Teachers’ Loft”. I know at the time I had thought it was a great idea, and it sounded so much like my comfy college cohort, and yet as many things are, time gets away from you and, especially as a teacher, you take less and less time for yourself and more and more for your students and your school. By the end of my first year I was struggling to live by Ubungani and to just keep some semblance of community within my classroom.

While I took the summer to decide whether I would even come back to the classroom the following year, I reconnected with some of my cohort friends and we’d meet frequently to discuss our year and the hardships we faced. It was evident to all of us that we not only missed our cohort, but there was something missing in us because we didn’t have one another. I promised myself that in the fall of my second year I’d find that place where as teachers, we could polish one another.

On my teaching staff that fall was a familiar face, who had often discussed her “class” she was taking. “It’s this community,” she’d say, “of teachers who support each other, it’s amazing.” It was that description that made me stop and ask what the name of this place was and if I could join. “The Teachers’ Loft,” was Michelle’s reply. Thus began my journey to create a new cohort of incredibly talented and “polishing” teachers at the Loft.

Expressing what this community means to me or has provided for me is best done through “ubungani.” Every meeting I came to I knew I would grow as a teacher, learn about current news or research in our field. I’d

other develop inquiry projects into their own classroom practice and understandings. We provide teachers with something they could not have otherwise, and the only way we can keep on providing them with such high-quality professional and personal development is through your generous contributions. The Teachers’ Loft relies solely on private donations to support the work of the NEW (Next Educational Wave) Teachers’ Collaborative Groups.

Please make a donation today to help us continue to serve and support novice teachers. Keeping us afloat helps to keep them afloat.

Thank you for continuing to support our work and our vision.

Peace-
Jenn Cook

A Publication Twenty-One Years Strong By Carol Hillman

Before and while serving on the Board of Directors of The Teachers’ Loft I have held a number of engaging positions in the field of Early Childhood Education: as a classroom teacher of four-year-olds, as an adjunct professor at Westchester Community College, as an early childhood consultant, as a board member of The Child Development Institute at Sarah Lawrence, and as a member of The Board Of Continuing Education at Bank Street College of Education.

Twenty years ago my first book on early childhood education was published. It was entitled Teaching Four-Year-Olds: A Personal Journey. It is still being used in college classrooms, and I have recently learned that it will be republished in 2009. What has happened of late has been a whole new way of using the book, thanks to the use of the World Wide Web. For this past year I have been part of a chat room with 142 early childhood students from Texas State University, who use the book as part of their coursework. The students pose questions to me about what I have written or their concerns as they go into the classroom for the first time. It has been an exciting adventure... a very personal connection and support for some of today’s new teachers.

be validated on good days and bad. I’d be able to deconstruct conflict with several eyes and ears to lend advice and share their information and PERSPECTIVE. I believe above all else, that The Teachers’ Loft polishing has to do with the perspective it provides. You are not the only first year teacher. You are not the only teacher who didn’t know what to do. You are not the only person to feel sad, lonely, upset, frustrated. And, on the flip side, what are some of the ways to maintain when things are going well?

When you step into our profession it can seem isolating at times, your own classroom with your own curriculum and your own students, and yet The Teachers’ Loft was twice monthly reminder that we are, in fact, standing beside one another in stream.

The Teachers’ Loft is my stream and the incredible teachers in it, my pebbles. I’m grateful that in my city, in MY loft, I can polish and be polished at the same time.

The Teachers’ Loft: A Little Piece of Home By Jessica Ulmer

I don’t know where I’d be right now if it wasn’t for the support that I received from my colleagues at The Teachers’ Loft. I came to the group as a second year teacher who was very dissatisfied with my teaching position and was very close to leaving the profession. Through the support of The Teachers’ Loft, I was able to figure out who I am as a teacher through collaboration with colleagues and where I need to focus to build myself in this career. I found out about The N.E.W. Teachers’ Collaborative through the Western Massachusetts Writing Project website during my research about their Summer Institute; I am now halfway through my work at the Institute and my work with The Teachers’ Loft has made me a valuable resource for all of the other teacher-leaders who are taking part.

Some of the opportunities that The Teachers’ Loft afforded me were the space and the time in which to complete my research in relation to my inquiry project. Being a new teacher, it is very unlikely that I have the time during the day or the energy when I get home to complete anything, never mind researching a topic or analyzing research data. The biweekly meetings also provided me with the time to just discuss issues that were weighing heavy on my shoulders with my colleagues. It was also a time in which we could share ideas and discuss innovative teaching strategies, related to our inquiry or not, that we could then take away from the meeting and apply to our own classrooms. My inquiry project I am beginning to research for the Summer Institute actually stems from a topic of discussion at a Teachers’ Loft meeting. It is amazing the connections that build between different groups once you become a teacher-researcher and teacher-leader.

I passed out fliers today for next year’s N.E.W. Teachers’ Collaborative group, and I hope that I get to take part in The Teachers’ Loft in some way next school year. Most of my colleagues at the Summer Institute seemed interested in the group either for themselves or for a colleague or two back at their schools. I love knowing that I might have had a part in making another new teacher’s experience that much better by advertising for the group. Though my life gets busier with every passing day, I can’t imagine not having that space in which to work next year.

T · I · M · E · L · I
 Teacher Induction Mentoring Empowerment and Leadership Initiative

The Teachers’ Loft has been working for well over a year to expand our mission into the teacher licensure arena in order to serve career-changers as well as create access for local community members interested in teaching in their own community schools. This summer we are thrilled to launch a Post-Baccalaureate Alternative Route Licensure Program for those interested in becoming a licensed teacher in Massachusetts. This collaborative program combines our collaborative groups and the content expertise of the faculty at Western New England College to further The Teachers’ Loft vision of teacher learning and professional growth.

What is TIMELI? TIMELI* is a collaborative arrangement between The Teachers’ Loft located in Holyoke, MA and Western New England College in Springfield, MA. This fall we will offer an alternative path to licensure for a Massachusetts initial license in secondary education in the following content areas: Biology, Chemistry, English, History, Mathematics, and Political Science. An alternative path to Massachusetts initial license focusing on licensure and induction enables future teachers to become members of both the local and professional communities. **Candidates will:**

- Learn to teach more effectively by developing tools of inquiry to become a reflective practitioner, develop teaching strategies grounded in contemporary learning theory, and acquire content knowledge in selected area of interest
- Join a cohort of colleagues who will collaborate in the process of becoming a teacher
- Have the opportunity to work in a classroom with students beginning the first semester
- Benefit from shared supervision and support while in the classroom setting from The Teachers’ Loft educators, Western New England faculty, and classroom teachers

**Pending final approval. An alternative path for licensure for Elementary Education is anticipated for the fall of 2009. Candidates interested in this option are encouraged to contact the Admissions Office at Western New England College.*

TIMELI has been designed as an affordable, part-time program that will take up to two academic years to complete. Candidates will be anyone interested in becoming a Massachusetts licensed teacher. Program advisors will assist individuals in mapping out a specific path to licensure whether individuals are new to the profession, currently working in an unlicensed role, or wish to formalize previous experience with school-age students. Courses will be offered one weekday evening, for approximately two and half hours, for eleven weeks during the fall, winter and spring at The Teachers’ Loft, with occasional class sessions at Western New England College. Online sessions will complement face-to-face time providing greater flexibility.

Find out more about what the program will involve at www.teachersloft.org or www.wnec.edu/adultlearning

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Thanks for your support!