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Lessons from Networking

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The Internet enables some of the best teaching minds to bond together in powerful professional learning communities

It's a sunny Thursday afternoon in May 2007. A group of 23 accomplished teachers from across the United States are gathered for a three-day structured conversation with education journalist John Merrow and his news production team. Merrow is preparing a series of reports for the PBS NewsHour on the effects of No Child Left Behind, and he's come to members of the Teacher Leaders Network to gather their insights.

We should qualify our description of the weather. It's a sunny afternoon on top of Grassy Mountain, near the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina, where the cofounder of the Teacher Leaders Network is helping moderate the dialogue from his home office. We can't say how the weather is in New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Oakland, Denver, Chicago, Alabama, Michigan, Virginia, or the Mississippi Delta area, where the participating teachers are e-mailing their comments from home and school computers, at times during the day that best suit their individual

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schedules. This activity is routine for network members, who use a variety of virtual communication tools to share their individual perspectives on education policy, both with interested visitors like the Merrow team and in ongoing daily discussions among themselves.

[Expanded Learning Communities](#)

Our culture underestimates teachers — not only the complexity of their work, but also their potential to contribute substantively to the dialogue about school reform. At the dawn of the 21st century, good teaching and good schools are concepts defined not by our best teachers but by school boards, administrators, think tanks, textbook companies, for-profit curriculum developers, and the testing industry. For the most part, teachers learn thirdhand about the policy actions that directly affect their classroom practice and professional growth opportunities. The collaboration and professional dialogue that most teachers experience is confined to their own schools, limited by their local context, and controlled by decision makers higher in the chain of command (Institute for *Educational Leadership*, 2001).

Within schools, teacher leadership is often discussed, sometimes touted, but rarely fully realized. Teachers are expected to adhere to leadership as traditionally defined in hierarchical organizations: Although they often fill roles as department chairs, grade-level leaders, and mentors, they typically serve at the pleasure or direction of principals. Most teacher leadership is still not viewed as a means to effect meaningful change in education (Lord & Miller, 2000).

Independent teacher networks have the potential to transform traditional concepts of teacher input and staff development. Lieberman and Grolnick (1996) write that teachers "need to be free to step outside [of local context] in order to consider ways to improve the very schools and system within which they work" (p. 41). Independent networks — both physical and virtual — make it possible for teachers to draw on external communities that promote divergent thinking. Such networks support the view that teachers have unique insights that can improve education and accelerate student achievement. Virtual networks are especially powerful because they enable some of the best teaching minds in a state, region, or nation to bond together into powerful professional learning communities.

[The Teacher Leaders Network](#)

The Teacher Leaders Network (TLN) is a maturing example of a virtual community launched by the Center for Teaching Quality in spring 2003. We founded TLN in an effort to expand the roles of teacher leaders in achieving genuine school reform. Network members, who join by invitation, now include nearly 300 teacher leaders in 30 states: National Board-certified Teachers; winners of Milken, National Education Association, and Presidential teacher excellence awards; and national, state, and district teachers of the year. They teach every grade and subject, in every kind of public school setting. On average, our members have been professional educators for 20 years. A significant majority are current classroom teachers, although some have moved into other roles as school-based coaches, lead teachers, teachers-in-residence, and teacher educators.

In his prescient 2002 book *Smart Mobs*, virtual collaboration expert Howard Rheingold described how groups of people would soon use digital *networking* tools to "gain new forms of social power, new ways to organize their interactions and exchanges" (p. xii). Just five years later, we see all around us the Internet's power to make this vision a reality.

At the Teacher Leaders Network, we have expanded this social *networking* potential by also working to build a sense of community, shared expertise, and professional friendship. We began TLN with a series of three-day e-mail conversations around broad topics of interest to teachers. The technology was primitive by today's standards — a simple discussion list that distributed e-mail to and *from* all the members of the group. No glitz — no photos, videos, or MySpace bells and whistles. But at the end of our scheduled series of topical conversations in June 2003, 80 percent of our participants agreed to remain and join an ongoing daily discussion of professional issues, under the Teacher Leaders Network banner.

In the intervening four years, TLN members have collectively posted nearly 36,000 messages, full of teacher ideas and insights. They have virtually engaged in structured conversations with outside stakeholders on such topics as No Child Left Behind, student testing, teacher education, professional development, performance pay, prescriptive teaching, and 21st-century learning. Much of this dialogue continues to take place through low-tech e-mail lists, which we find more intimate and dynamic than message boards, or through the TLN Teacher Voices blog (<http://teacherleaderstypepad.com/tln%5fteacher%5fvoices>). When network members engage in long-term projects, we augment our virtual communication with live conferencing platforms, blogs, and wikis.

From the earliest days of the network, its mission has been to help accomplished teachers develop their leadership skills to the point where they can publicly demonstrate the capacity of teacher leaders to change teaching, learning, and education policy. As TLN members have become better virtual communicators and conceptual thinkers, we have witnessed how individuals have grown in leadership around both policy and practice.

Changing Teaching

Through partnerships with the University of Connecticut, the College of William and Mary, and the IBM Transition to Teaching program, members of the Teacher Leaders Network have virtually mentored student teachers, first-year teachers, and career switchers. This online support supplements but does not seek to supplant site-based mentoring programs. TLN's mentoring initiatives not only improve retention and help prospective and beginning teachers learn to teach more effectively, but also model professionalism for a new generation of potential teacher leaders.

In the University of Connecticut program, five TLN teachers, led by former Michigan Teacher of the Year Nancy Flanagan, have served as on-call e-mentors to novice teachers. The wide-ranging discussion has included such topics as developing classroom management, preparing for a substitute, partnering with parents, motivating students, surviving in negative school climates, and working for social justice. In one exchange, for example, new teacher Crystal wrote,

I am concerned about my new students. They began the year with a teacher who left in November and have had two different long-term substitutes. Now they are getting me! I work with a very sensitive population (special education) and these students have a lot of psychological, emotional, and behavioral needs... Do any of you have any advice to make the transition to another new teacher easier on my students?

Crystal received 14 responses *from* the TLN mentoring team (which included a National Board-certified special education teacher). The replies offered not only

support and encouragement but also practical *lessons* and activities and solid classroom management advice. Here are excerpts *from* two mentor responses:

I know you are going to make a great teacher because of the focus

of your question. You asked how to make the transition easier for

your students, not how to make it easier for you. Perspective is everything, and yours is right on target.

I teach 6th grade learning disabled kids and I have lots of language arts, reading, and math **lessons** and units you can use depending on your students' ages and abilities. As for smooth transitions and positive outlets, here are some quick ideas: I use relaxation music a lot in my room when the kids are stressed or need some quiet "downtime." I do read alouds every day during the last 5-10 minutes of class to help them relax, utilize their auditory processing skills, and just enjoy

a good book. We play commercially produced games, such as Scrabble and Kid Trivia, to strengthen reading and spelling skills. Hope these ideas help. I stepped into my first teaching

job because the previous teacher was fired.

The TLN virtual mentoring model includes both group discussions and one-to-one communication, and mentors frequently engage in detailed private exchanges that help panicked novices gain self-confidence. In the group discussion, new teachers often enrich the experience with their own advice for novice colleagues. Another new teacher wrote to Crystal,

The first thing to remember is that these kids have had a lot of people coming in, so they will need a sense of normalcy **from**

you. It's going to be really rough (I'm guessing) the first few

days. Just by coming in every day, and staying there, you are helping settle things down.

Changing Learning

The Teacher Leaders Network includes a diverse mix of K-12 teachers, instructional coaches, professional developers, action research enthusiasts, specialists in learning community development, and classroom assessment experts. The TLN discussion group engages in frequent, lively, in-depth discussions of learning issues. The use and abuse of homework, for example, has cycled through the discussion on several occasions. In spring 2006, Ellen, a charter school teacher in Southern California, wrote,

My new school is gearing up for a conversation about homework next week. Apparently there are very strong opinions surrounding

the issue on all sides, including parent opinions, and they have

been unable to come to a consensus. We're trying to establish some school norms, and this is one issue to be decided. I think

it will be infinitely more productive if we can focus our

conversation on the research to inform our decision. What I need *from* all of you wise folks is the research. We are a K-8 school, so if the research is different according to grade level, that's important to know.

Ellen's post triggered a several-day conversation that produced a dozen important research citations and explored the general value of homework, grade-level appropriateness, homework in different content areas, effective homework design, the issue of grading (or not), and the need to reach an understanding with parents about homework policies. Months later, when the media widely publicized two new books opposing homework, a number of TLN members commented that the earlier discussion had prompted improvements in their own homework practices and helped them prepare to discuss the issue with colleagues and parents.

Online conversations range *from* improving such entrenched education traditions as homework to paving new roads to the future of classroom instruction. Among the network's membership is a contingent of teachers who advocate 21st-century learning. They frequently describe ways to employ Web-based tools to help students master the higher-order skills identified by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills and other groups.

Renee Moore, a Milken Award winner and board member of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching who teaches in the Mississippi Delta area, writes,

On a personal classroom level, TLN has impacted my own teaching most in the area of technology, particularly introduction to Web-based technologies and how they could be used for instruction. I teach dual enrollment high school courses as well as composition and literature courses at the community college. Some of these courses I teach online. Through my TLN colleagues, I have learned about wikis, Skype, blogs, and other tools – several of which I have incorporated into my online and campus courses with impressive results.

A great deal of the professional learning in the TLN community is pushed out into participants' classrooms, into the learning communities of their own schools, into their writing for local and national publications and their own professional blogs, and into their work as professional development leaders.

[Changing Policy](#)

One important goal of the Teacher Leaders Network has been to help teachers emerge *from* their isolation and expand their skill set to include effective advocacy in the often hard-edged environment of education policymaking. TLN members are afforded many opportunities to practice leadership by writing for and presenting to important audiences. TLN members gain leadership experience through service on state task forces, testimony at Congressional hearings, and panel presentations to such organizations as the Aspen Institute; and they share their new insights with the entire TLN community through debriefings in our e-mail discussion groups and in live online workshops.

We have also begun work on a series of in-depth policy projects called Teacher-Solutions, which bring together a group of network members to assess and debate questions related to important education policy topics. For the first report in this series, Performance Pay for Teachers: Designing a System That Students Deserve, 18 teacher leaders engaged in structured virtual dialogue with policy analysts,

community activists, teacher union leaders, and practitioners and developed a comprehensive framework for paying teachers more and differently. Their final report is available on the network Web site at www.teacherleaders.org/teacher_solutions/index.php. (For a summary, see Special Report, p. 83.)

At the Center for Teaching Quality, we are often asked, Aren't teacher unions the "voice" of teachers? Without question, unions are an important voice. Our TLN colleagues are eager to augment the union model in ways they believe will make transformational leadership a more widely accepted and respected role for U.S. teachers. They are determined to convince elected officials, administrators, and union leaders of the value in setting a place at the policy table for the unfiltered voices of expert teachers who work every day in our public schools.

Conditions for Successful Virtual Networks

Many efforts to create online professional collaboration fail because the creators assume that if they build it, teachers will come. Perhaps they will — but busy teachers will stay only if they find a trustworthy, well-run environment that provides a significant value for the time invested.

Successful virtual communities require the daily attention and support of their sponsoring organizations. They require skilled moderators who have a deep understanding of the issues that engage and challenge a community. The moderators help create a rhythm for the community, encourage different perspectives, and invite different levels of participation. Their actions make it clear that teachers are respected as professionals and that there will be no attempt to impose an outside agenda.

As a corollary, successful virtual communities cannot be developed on the cheap. Although virtual communities come in all sizes and have many different purposes, they all need skilled moderation, technical help, and administrative assistance to support virtual project work, arrange conferences, and serve as a liaison between the community and the outside world. The Center for Teaching Quality has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in the first four years of the Teacher Leaders Networks development.

Teachers are far more likely to remain fully engaged in a virtual community when they see results, not only for themselves, but also for students and the profession. The Teacher Leaders Network has widely publicized the voices and ideas of TLN members through the TLN Web site and blogs; through regular essays published in partnership with edweek.org; and through opportunities to present in dozens of national, state, and local forums. These strategies have created a strong sense of accomplishment and pride, which will sustain the community as it moves forward.

Developing professional communities around teacher voice is risky business. Accomplished teachers come with important insights and deep understandings. Often, however, they do not come with the skills needed to leverage what they know in often highly charged policy settings. Leadership development that includes training, sharing, and support for taking on increasingly challenging tasks is crucial in helping teacher leaders become policy leaders.

"The idea of developing teacher voice is scary for those who are scripting what we say and do," TLN member Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach told our PBS guests back in May:

If teachers know how to lead, how to be effective in evoking change, then that creates problems. Teachers start

asking questions. Things get messy. We awaken the sleeping giant.

Independent teacher networks have the potential to transform traditional concepts of teacher input and staff development.

The Teacher Leaders Network seeks to expand the roles of teacher leaders in achieving genuine school reform.

Developing professional communities around teacher voice is risky business

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