



Exploring the Teaching of Writing Through a Professional Learning Community

Recently, both the New Brunswick Department of Education and local school districts have begun to experiment with Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a new way to approach the professional development of teachers. Key characteristics of PLCs include collaboration, communication and commitment, a philosophy of ownership of and direct involvement in the professional development process, belief in the concept of shared leadership, administrative support, and a shared vision to improve some aspect of professional practices. Research also suggests that partnerships with other stakeholders (e.g., other schools, universities, parents) can improve the effectiveness of the PLC. This last characteristic encouraged us in the Second Language Research Institute of Canada at UNB to undertake an action-research project at a local elementary school to explore best practices in the teaching of writing.¹

The term “best practice” comes to education from disciplines such as medicine, law and architecture, where it is used to describe current and solid work of good reputation. In education, the terms evidence-based practices, promising practices and best practices are all used to refer to strategies that produce the best results for teaching and learning. The aim of this particular study was to help learners attain at least minimal provincial performance standards by helping teachers explore and enhance best practices for the teaching of writing. The study also coincides with a renaissance of the Bachelor of Education program at UNB, and lessons learned from studies like this one have helped to conceptualize new ways of collaborating with our school partners.

The Project

The elementary school in which this study took place has approximately 450 students from Kindergarten to Grade 5, 25 teachers, and several other professionals and specialists. The school currently offers two programs: the regular English program and the early French Immersion (FI) program beginning in Grade 1. Of the eight teachers participating in the PLC, four were in their first five years of teaching – a demographic representative of the teaching population in the province.

TWELVE TEACHERS SHARED THEIR IDEAS, THEIR PERCEPTIONS, AND

THEIR CHALLENGES RELATED TO THE TEACHING OF WRITING.

In the fall of 2005, several new teachers who were looking to expand their knowledge of best teaching practices joined with a more experienced teacher in an informal collaboration. This support network eventually led to the creation of a formal PLC. In September of 2006, our research team proposed a partnership with the school and a research project was established.

This study incorporated principles of cooperative inquiry and democratic dialogue, methodologies that promote active two-way communication, the participation of each member of the team, a balance between reflection and action, and recognition of professional experience as a springboard for dialogue. The first phase of the project included regular monthly meetings with the PLC at the school during an eight-month period. Twelve teachers shared their ideas, their perceptions, and their challenges related to the teaching of writing. Field notes, written comments from teachers, and interviews with teachers all contributed to the construction of knowledge about the teaching of writing and about PLCs. The culmination of this first phase was a writing model that we have called *ÉCRI (écriture cohérente et raisonnée en immersion)*: coherent and reasoned writing in immersion), integrating best practices both from the literature and from teachers’ experiences in the classroom. The second phase of the project, classroom observation and filming, was a springboard for further reflective commentary, and ultimately became part of a pedagogical DVD highlighting the *ÉCRI* model.

The Writing Model

The *ÉCRI* model is the result of a synthesis of the literature, collaborative construction of teacher knowledge, and subsequent experimentation with, reflection upon, and adaptation of its various components. It is based on principles of project-based pedagogy and balanced literacy. In a project-based approach, learning and instruction are organized in a manner that builds toward the realization of a final project. Balanced literacy encourages

and supports the integration of the four literacy skills: speaking, listening, writing and reading.

The *ÉCRI* model organizes best practices in writing into a logical and coherent framework, according to five instructional phases and relevant complementary activities.²

During the first instructional phase, the teacher presents the idea and the parameters of the final project (usually involving a written, oral, and artistic/dramatic component), including the specific writing genre (narrative, information text, persuasive text) that will be involved. At this stage, the personalization aspect is of utmost importance, making connections between the final project and the students’ lives and activating prior knowledge about the theme of the final project and the writing genre.

The second phase, modeled writing, consists of three steps. First, the teacher presents one or several models of the writing genre and guides the students in an analysis of the structure and the organization of the genre, the results of which are recorded on graphic organizer. Next, students compare two texts of the same genre in order to discover what textual elements (e.g., vocabulary, verb tense, specific structures) are common to the genre. Finally, based on the textual elements, the teacher and students together create the rubric for the final project.

During the third phase, shared writing, the teacher shares his/her writing process by composing a text in front of the students and thinking aloud his or her decision-making processes (word choice, attention to grammatical elements, etc.). Students evaluate the quality of the teacher’s text, using the rubric created in Phase 2, and offer suggestions to improve the text.

In the fourth phase, interactive writing, students themselves create a collaborative text while the teacher plays the role of facilitator of this highly interactive and co-operative process.



FIVE OVERARCHING THEMES EMERGED: PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS, ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING PRACTICE, COLLABORATIVE SUPPORT, ATTENTION TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS, AND EXPERIENCING SUCCESS.

In the last phase of the ÉCRI model, independent writing, students use all the concepts and strategies they have learned during the previous four phases to plan, write their first draft, conference with peers and teacher, edit and publish their final copy. Once the writing is completed, individual students present their final projects, incorporating oral, visual, artistic or dramatic components.

During each of the five phases of the ÉCRI model, the teacher engages students in complementary activities such as relevant reading, oral tasks, and mini-lessons related to specific writing traits and writing strategies.

Insights from Teachers

The majority of teachers who participated in the PLC believed that the experience had a positive effect on their teaching, on their students' learning, and on their professional relationships.

Five overarching themes emerged from the qualitative data collected from teachers: professional conversations, enhancement of teaching practice, collaborative support, attention to individual needs, and experiencing success.

The PLC was not only a time and place to have professional conversations, but also a springboard for professional dialogue outside the parameters of the PLC. The lead teacher, who kept a reflective journal throughout the process, commented on a change of philosophy that occurred during this project: "Our immersion staff started to internalize a spirit of collaboration. In the morning, before the bell, it wasn't uncommon to see teachers discussing with one another their lesson plan for writing." One teacher stated, "We adopted a common language... In the morning before the bell rang, it would not be surprising to hear teachers having informal discussions about writing and the model: 'Where are you in the interactive writing phase?' 'I've got another approach for shared writing.' 'Come see my new graphic organizer.'"

In addition, teachers felt that the model served as a means of enhancing their practice. A Grade 4 teacher described his experience this

way: "This model helps students better understand the writing task at hand. Also, this model facilitates the implementation of other writing resources and strategies that we are encouraged to use." As initially stated, the driving force behind the objective to improve teaching practices was the desire to enhance the learning experience for the students. As a Grade 3 teacher said, "We don't just ask the kids to write – we teach them how to write. We understand that each writing phase (step) is important for student success."

The learner-centred nature of this PLC was obvious from the first meeting, but there also existed a desire to build a supportive community of colleagues. A Grade 1 teacher reflected on the value of collaboration: "I see the PLC as a support team for sharing (individual) ideas, good experiences, not-so-good experiences in order to benefit the whole group." A Grade 5 teacher remarked on the affective side of this sort of professional support: "We began to help each other, support each other, and listen to one another. Several professional friendships were formed. We no longer felt isolated."

Although these sessions were seen to benefit the group at large, teachers also acknowledged their individual impact. Through this experience, some teachers began to develop a new confidence in their own teaching. Attention to both group and individual needs within the PLC helped to develop their sense of worth. Sharing individual challenges and struggles – as well as successes and accomplishments – allowed individual teachers to grow as professionals. One Grade 3 teacher put it this way: "The meetings with you gave me a sense of reassurance in times of difficulty, when writing was not going very well, and a sense of accomplishment when you came into my class and saw that the students understood the writing process."

This idea of success was reiterated by others and relates to the final theme. Through the PLC and the research project, teachers were given a voice and teachers' practices were valued. As teachers worked with the writing model that they had co-created – in their

EN BREF Cette étude entreprise par l'Institut de recherche en langues secondes du Canada à l'UNB visait à aider les apprenants à atteindre au moins les normes de réussite minimales de la province, en mettant sur pied une communauté d'apprentissage professionnel (CAP) pour aider les enseignants à explorer et à améliorer les meilleures pratiques d'enseignement de l'écriture. Le modèle d'enseignement de l'écriture obtenu résulte d'une synthèse de la documentation, d'une élaboration collaborative des savoirs des enseignants, puis de l'expérimentation, de l'analyse et de l'adaptation de ses différentes composantes. Le modèle est fondé sur des principes de pédagogie par projet et d'alphabetisation équilibrée, encourageant et appuyant l'intégration des quatre compétences en littératie : l'expression orale, l'écoute, l'écriture et la lecture. En collaborant à l'élaboration d'un modèle d'écriture, en le testant et en partageant les pratiques exemplaires avec le milieu éducatif, les membres de la CAP ont eu le sentiment d'être utiles et de contribuer à la profession.

classrooms, and in some cases while being observed and videotaped – they began to feel like they were making real progress and succeeding at their initial goal, as this Grade 5 teacher's comments indicate: "I've never had so much success teaching writing as through the use of the model."

Conclusion

This research project made a contribution to best practices in the teaching of writing, in the effective operation of PLCs, and in research conducted in a PLC context. In addition to supporting many of the PLC best practices seen in previous research, this study highlighted the importance of having a very specific goal and working toward this goal in a way that included the voice, the experiences, and the expertise of each member of the PLC in the knowledge construction process. Collaborating on the development of a writing model, testing this model, and then sharing the best practices in a DVD format with the wider educational community gave the members of the PLC a sense of purpose and a sense of contribution to the profession.

We are continuing to explore both writing practices and PLCs through a middle school project designed to improve results on provincial writing assessments. In addition, the Faculty of Education in which we work is introducing a PLC concept for our student teaching interns, building on lessons learned from this and other research projects.

As a final note, it is important to realize that these partnerships come with challenges. Overcoming feelings of uncertainty and frustration through sincere collaboration and communication is not always easy. However, we have found that a core group of motivated and committed PLC members can address issues related to teaching and learning in a meaningful and productive manner. PLCs, when properly developed, lead to a shared vision, providing both student teachers and practicing teachers with the best that theory and practice have to offer. |

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Notes

- 1 This project was made possible by the financial support of the Department of Canadian Heritage
- 2 P. Kristmanson, J. Dicks, J. Le Bouthillier and R. Bourgoin, "L'écriture en immersion: Les pratiques exemplaires et le rôle d'une communauté professionnelle d'apprentissage," *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics* (forthcoming).

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