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Leveraging Technology to Build Professional Communities for Teachers in Montana

Montana's OPI English Language Arts and Literacy Instructional Coordinator shares a successful model for rural teacher outreach and collaboration.

Montana is the fourth largest state in square miles, and with a population around a million people, there is a lot of space between teachers and schools. More than 50% of our schools have less than 100 students, and many schools are one or two room schools that service students in multiple grades. Providing equitable professional learning for educators across the state is a challenge. In the Content Standards and Instruction (CSI) Division at the Office of Public Instruction, we often grapple with the how to provide equitable access to high quality professional learning for all teachers. With so many teachers living in distant places and without easy access to the larger towns and cities that often host professional learning events, how can we provide up-to-date learning? In July 2017, the Montana Board of Public Education adopted three new content area standards: Arts, Health Enhancement, and Science. How do we, the division assigned to assist teachers in understanding how to implement the content standards to support student learning, provide this support for teachers across the state?

In 2015, this question became even more personal. I met with Billings Skyview High School teachers Wendy Tyree and Bridgett Paddock. Wendy had recently started teaching at Skyview High School, after teaching in the small, unincorporated community of Rapelje, MT, where she was the only English teacher for grades seven through twelve. She mentioned the difference she felt between teaching at Skyview High School with a team of teachers, and how she had felt being the only teacher. She was thrilled to be in a school that had a team of teachers with whom to collaborate professionally. Bridgett, likewise, wanted to support teacher professionalism. She pointed out how it often feels like teachers are the scapegoats for education's ills, while in reality, they are the expert professionals who work diligently to make a difference in students' learning every day. How can we, she asked, provide support for teachers to enhance their own professionalism? An idea was born. Using OPI's technology resources for online meetings in combination with the Teacher Learning Hub, Bridgett and Wendy designed a network for teachers to meet online. It became the Montana Writing Teacher's PLC. This live, online meeting met for forty-five minutes on the second Wednesday of each month at 3:45 pm.

Bridgett and Wendy structured the online meeting to have a strong writing component. We are, after all, not merely teachers of writing, but writers ourselves. Each session started with a shared google document into which all participants wrote their responses to a question or prompt aligned to the day's topic. After quiet writing time, participants started to comment in the document on other participants' comments, sharing links to resources or simply asking questions. Then, the discussion began where the written responses led the conversation. With slow participation at the beginning, gradually attendance grew to an average 6-10 participants per meeting. In addition,

Social Collaboration in the Workplace

over 100 teachers have viewed recordings of these meetings online at the Teacher Learning Hub.

In 2015, about the same time Bridgett, Wendy, and I were meeting in Minneapolis and creating this plan, the OPI was re-launching the Teacher Learning Hub (the Hub). The Hub, housed in the Content Standards and Instruction (CSI) Division, provides high-quality online and blended learning opportunities aligned to the standards. Educators earn renewal units and courses range from a single hour (or single renewal unit) up to 30 hours. Courses come in a variety of formats. The most popular are the self-paced courses. These courses allow teachers to complete activities on their own time and at their own pace. Facilitated courses have an active facilitator and have due dates for participants to follow for activity completion. In addition to these courses, the Hub offers group courses that are designed for teams of teachers to take together, in the same room, in order to develop a common language or outcome for their instructional methodology. An example of this type of course is *A School's Guide to Creating a School-wide Reading & Writing Protocol*, developed by Kalispell educator, Dr. Dana Haring.

Pedagogically, the Hub works on a social constructivist basis. This learning management system (LMS) is designed to let the learner guide their own learning through choice activities, active discussions, and opportunities to extend their thinking and learning. Interest in the Hub has grown in huge numbers since 2015. Now with over 10,100 users, the Hub has issued more than 50,500 renewal units in a variety of courses since November 2015. In the ELA content area, we have 10 courses, and they have generated over 2,100 renewal units, with over 436 teachers enrolled in the various ELA courses. The Writing PLC specifically has had about 70 teachers attend live sessions since January 2016, and issued 240 renewal units online. This data shows not only a high interest in using technology to connect with teachers across Montana, but also a need for high-quality online professional learning.

A chance encounter at the NCTE Annual Conference in Minneapolis in 2015 paved the way for ELA educators in Montana to build a community of professionals through technology. Out of this PLC, participants have presented at national conferences on the PLC itself, created Hub courses, and most importantly, built networks with their

fellow Montana teachers. Undoubtedly, the impact of the Hub and the Writing PLC has enhanced the professionality of educators across the state.

Since 2015, our offerings in English Language Arts have grown exponentially! Log into the Hub www.opi.mt.gov/learninghub to take these courses:
- Write From the Start: K-2 Writing Strategies
- Writing to Learn: 3-6 Writing Strategies
- Writing Across the Disciplines in Grades 5-12
- Using Assessment to Enhance Writing
- Reading Between the Lines: Close Reading Strategies for Secondary Schools
- Using Writing to Teach Critical Thinking
- Integrating Journalism in Your Classroom
- A School's Guide to Creating a School-Wide Reading & Writing Protocol
- Montana Writing Teachers PLC