

Using a Blog to Intensify Reflections

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"I want to teach like Tiger Woods plays golf." I heard this declaration at a textbook presentation several years ago and it has really stuck with me. The speaker explained that Tiger Woods is truly a reflective practitioner when it comes to the game of golf. The public just sees him out on the fairways, but Tiger spends a lot of time behind the scenes studying the game, observing others, analyzing film, and reflecting on his own performance. The result is excellence.

Isn't this what CFGs can help us achieve as teachers? My hope is that setting aside time for study and reflection about our teaching practice will help us achieve excellence in our classrooms.

[Donna's Reflections, 12-20-2003]

The above excerpt, from my blog *Donna's Reflections* (<http://donna.robreid.com/weblog/>), sums up why regular reflection is so important—careful consideration and analytical deliberation of our experiences can help guide us to excellence whether our profession is teaching, coaching, or even playing golf. Writing reflections leads to powerful, personalized learning that sticks with us.

Another entry puts it this way: *Confucius said it best: "By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest."* [Donna's Reflections, 8-16-2004]

So how do we make time and space to engage in this "noblest" method of learning wisdom? I recognized the power of regular reflection when I served as a CFG coach and chair of the school-wide portfolio committee at Johnston Middle School in Houston, Texas. Simply encouraging the habit of regular professional reflection kept the faculty focused on the mission of developing a safe, caring, respectful learning environment where both faculty and students could challenge themselves to be life-long learners.

My own reflections blossomed two years ago when I took on the job of Consultant for CFG Support for the Houston A+ Challenge. At the time, I wondered how I could best encourage myself to continuously reflect, make my work public, and document my own learning. To model these essential habits, I started authoring the blog *Donna's Reflections*.

Blogs, or web logs, are journals that are posted on the World Wide Web. Besides text, the entries may include photographs, document files, and links to other websites. Because they allow readers to add their own comments to an entry, blogs are more interactive than a paper-and-pencil journal. They are also far more public since blogs are accessible anytime, anywhere, from any computer connected to the web.

Of course, anybody can keep a journal with pen and paper, but the blog ramps journaling up a notch by making it public and making the reflections interactive. For example, after every meeting of my current CFG, I post a summary of our activities and every member's written reflections. Each member is encouraged to add comments that express their own thinking and learning, and these comments enliven the blog by turning the reflections into a conversation instead of a monologue:

This is my first time responding in this medium, and I'm amazed by the different modes of sharing technology provides us. I find great value in having a "voice," but more value in being able to share it in this way and get feedback. HURRAH for CFG work! [Marcela, 3-24-2004]

I love the quick posting of everyone's thoughts. It makes my own reflection of the meeting more insightful and deep. [Michaelann, 4-13-2005]

Interestingly, the blog has strengthened our CFG in several ways. First, through regular postings and comments from group members, it provides a way to sustain conversation in between meetings. Second, it produces an ongoing record of our work together, and importantly, that record is public. Most importantly, writing the blog has intensified my own reflections by helping me discover that reflecting is not just something to do during the final ten minutes of a meeting—it is truly at the core of my work. Earlier this year, I admitted:

I've once again been struck by how central the act of reflecting is to my work and how my work unravels when I do not deliberately reflect.

I'm embarrassed that I have posted so few entries over the last few months. I slacked off when a colleague wondered out loud if anybody was really reading the blog. The implication was that the time I spent writing entries wasn't "worth it." As a result, I feel like I've just been moving from deadline to deadline in my work without much inspiration. I've learned that my blog is as much a tool for motivating current planning and action (continued on page 16)

principals are now engaged in central office work that it was inevitable that our work would eventually flourish at the district level. These administrators have experienced the power of making their authentic work public to their peers for the purpose of receiving feedback to improve the effectiveness of their work. We now know that whole districts can be transformed when the practice of professional learning communities becomes embedded into the culture of teachers, principals, and central office administrators.

Much has been written recently about the essential role of professional learning communities in improving student achievement. It seems as though every educational journal I read has a reference to learning communities. However, not enough has been written about NSRF practice and effectiveness in improving the quality of the educational experience for students and teachers. Until now. This fall, the educational honor society Phi Lambda Theta's journal "Educational Horizons" will be entirely devoted to NSRF practice in schools and universities across the country. Each Center of Activity will receive ten copies to share with their colleagues.

In celebration of NSRF's tenth anniversary, the Lastinger Center, an NSRF Center of Activity in Southern Florida, has received funding from the Wachovia Foundation to document our learning over the last ten years. This publication will be an invaluable resource to coaches and facilitators across the country working at any level of schooling.

NSRF is committed to generating the resources to support and document research that will provide the evidence necessary to deepen and sustain our work through our second decade of Critical Friends Groups and facilitative leadership.

At this year's Winter Meeting, my colleague Gene Thompson-Grove boldly stated that our work "goes against the tide of current educational reform." I take great pride in that statement. I am also aware that we are contributing to a very powerful undertow pulling us back to our core beliefs of equity and social justice for every child. Although the tide is easier to see, it is the undertow that disrupts the status quo that can cause the sands to shift. NSRF is committed to continuing our tradition to build on the talents and strengths of all our members and to interrupt those practices that do not serve our students well.

I wish you all a school year guided by inquiry and curiosity, supported by colleagues and community, and focused on the success of each child. ■

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as it is a tool for encouraging reflection on the recent past. [Donna's Reflections, 1-11-2005]

Maintaining the blog actually helps me reflect on my reflections. Studying the entries over

Blog Links

Here are some links to get you started on your own blogging adventure:

<http://awd.cl.uh.edu/blog/> provides resources for getting started to use blogs for yourself or with your students.

<http://bloggingineducation.blogspot.com/> highlights articles related to using blogs in a variety of education-specific ways.

<http://donna.robreid.com/weblog/> my own web log shares the activities and reflections of a CFG Coach.

<http://blogs.setonhill.edu/MikeArnzen/> Pedablogue, a "personal inquiry into the scholarship of teaching," is authored by Michael Arnzen of Seton Hill University. His personal reflections are updated regularly, often humorous, and always thoughtful. This blog is a great model for a professional reflective journal.

time helps me see connections and reinforce the good work that we do for students, teachers, and schools. Now if I could just find time to work on that golf swing... ■

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