Reflection and Reform

"How come almost everyone who writes about school reform works someplace other than a school?" This question and author Joseph Check's ideas around it were at the heart of his talk at the National Writing Project's Spring Meeting in Washington, D.C., in April. Check's thoughts, recapped briefly in an interview in The Voice*, are presented here in detail. In this article, Check argues for reflective teaching even in the face of mandated, external, "exemplary programs." As well, he identifies five "myths" or beliefs about reflective writing and suggests ways to address the negative attitudes engendered by them.

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Directors and teachers around the country, including myself, are struggling to adapt the writing project model to new demands placed on teachers and principals by "whole school change." I recently spoke on this topic at the National Writing Project Spring Meeting in Washington, D.C., and many people have since asked me to write in more detail about one particular section of my talk, where I argued for the importance of reflective teaching even in the face of mandated, external, "exemplary programs." I identified five "myths" or beliefs about reflective writing often held by school-reform advocates and suggested ways to address the negative attitudes engendered by these myths. In this article, I will present these ideas in much more detail than I was able to do in my talk.

My views on this subject have developed over time and from a variety of experiences. For a number of years in the 1990s, my colleague Grace Hall McEntee and I designed and conducted yearlong reflective writing programs for teachers and administrators from across the country. We did this first for the Coalition of Essential Schools and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, and later for the Center for Urban Science Education Reform. The success of this work led me to propose a similar model to colleagues in the National Writing Project. These conversations led first to Project-Outreach-sponsored retreats on the East and West Coasts facilitated by myself and Tom Fox, director of the Northern California Writing Project and then, since 1999, to the NWP Professional Writing Retreat in Santa Fe. Throughout this time, Grace and I and a small group of committed teachers from our first retreats have continued to meet and write as a collective called Educators Writing for Change (EWC). EWC will soon publish a book of essays titled Reflection: The Heart of Changing Practice (Teachers College Press) that offers many school-based ways to promote reflective writing and teaching in the context of change.

All of these efforts aim to support the development of reflective writing about practice by teachers and administrators. Consistently, most of the teachers and principals involved proved to have experience with one of the many reform initiatives that form the new status quo of American schooling. On the last day of a retreat, as participants prepared to return to their schools, a comment I heard regularly was, "This retreat has been great. It's such a luxury to have time to think and write. But how will I ever keep it up when I get home? Nobody at my school will understand this at all!"

Like Grace McEntee, Tom Fox, and many others who have done this type of work, I believe that reflection is central to change. I also believe practitioner-writers when they tell me that their school cultures—cultures of reform, for the most part—are either indifferent or actively hostile to regular written reflection. This is true

* See "Teacher Stories: School Reform's Missing Link" by Art Peterson in the May-June 2002 issue of The Voice.
even when the reflective writing they are working on deals with the change process itself. The fact that reform initiatives whose goal is to promote change can place such a low value on reflective writing is something that has occupied much of my thinking lately. I see it as a disappointment and a dilemma but also as an opportunity and a challenge. In this essay, I will lay out the reasons why I think this situation exists and offer some suggestions for bringing together reflection and reform in the work of writing projects.

**Teacher Empowerment and Systemic Reform**

The current wave of school reform is now more than two decades old and shows no sign of abating. In many states, change has been mandated in four areas: high-stakes standardized tests; curricula linked to the tests; mandated professional development for teachers linked to this narrowed curricular and pedagogical vision; and greater accountability for principals, who are evaluated primarily on their ability to raise standardized test scores by enforcing the mandated curricular and teaching methods.

Lost within the philosophy of mandated reform has been a basic fact about change: lasting transformation is rooted in reflection, autonomy, and community, not in robotic compliance by teachers and administrators who are told never to think for themselves. I am reminded of a comment I once heard Steven Levy, a fourth grade teacher and author, make at a school change conference: “Ultimately, all our questions about reform have to be answered with what happens between a teacher and a student in the classroom.” When teachers are at the bottom of reform rather than at its center—receivers not initiators of change, “reformed” not “reformers”—then changing “what happens between a teacher and a student in the classroom” becomes exponentially more difficult to achieve.

I believe that in many schools, increasing top-down pressure for reform has created an unacknowledged impasse between those who believe systems change individuals and those who believe individuals change systems. To put it more precisely, the current status of reform can be viewed as a stalemate between those who believe mandated systemic change (e.g., in funding formulas, governance, scheduling, curriculum, assessment, pedagogy) can change the performance of individuals within systems (principals, teachers, students), and those who believe, consciously or unconsciously, that the only authentic change is individual and that larger change flows outward from myriad individual transformations.

Michael Fullan believes that “As we work on clarifying what students should know and be able to do . . . we must focus on what is the critical implementation issue: *only when greater clarity and coherence are achieved in the minds of teachers will we have any chance of success*” (1996, italics in original). If reforms are failing because of the inability to bridge the gap between individuals and systems, then long-term reform may prove impossible unless top-down mandates are somehow met in the middle by bottom-up, practitioner-initiated understandings and feedback. Currently, we lack strategies to make such meetings happen because we do not invest time and money in techniques that will help teachers and principals achieve “greater clarity and coherence.”

Practitioners’ reflective narratives can be powerful levers to open and sustain dialogues that promote individual professional growth within the context of overall reform goals, enriching both individuals and systems. Unfortunately, if my experience is typical, the “reform world” and the “writing world” move in two different orbits, largely ignorant of each other. The notion of practitioner writing communities, for instance, is a new one for many involved in reform and can seem to defy widely held beliefs about the way change occurs. In advocating for practitioner writing programs as an essential part of the larger change process in schools, I have repeatedly encountered five beliefs—all misconceptions or half-truths—that I wish to address here.

**Responding to the “Five Beliefs”**

**Belief One:** Writing and reform are at odds because writing is an individual, isolating act while reform requires team-building, community, and consensus.

Most systemic reform strategies call for team building of some sort, such as school councils, cross-disciplinary teams, or grade-wide curricular planning teams. To many people, writing is based on a type of isolated, individual effort that seems at odds with team building. This misconception rests on outdated notions of the way successful writers actually operate and the way reflective writing occurs.

The belief that writing is a particularly solitary, asocial endeavor has achieved mythical status in our society. How else do we explain the ease with which we conjure up images of the novelist or poet locked in a solitary mountain cabin wrestling with creative demons? In contrast, more than twenty years of writing-process research has given us a
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more accurate, though less romantic, picture of the way writers of all ages and types actually compose and revise, and it involves a community of writers who offer each other both supportive criticism and an immediate audience.

Yet the old myth survives, and anyone who works with practitioners to help them write about practice learns to acknowledge and address it early in the process. As I have written elsewhere, “Once writing-group participants begin to believe in themselves and in the quality of response they get from their peers, they realize how badly our common mythology distorts the act of writing . . . by focusing on the writer’s isolation.” As practitioner-writers listen actively to each other’s work and offer critical response, they create a professional community unlike any they may have known. Within such a community, they can truly begin to “find their own way” as teachers, even amid a welter of mandates. My colleague Kathleen O’Shaughnessy, a middle school teacher, a writing retreat participant, and now herself a retreat facilitator, puts it this way:

A teacher who can find her own way knows her territory—her students, her school culture, her understanding about how kids learn—as well as she knows the neighborhood she grew up in. And more importantly, she knows she knows it. Finding one’s own way is the essence of teacher empowerment. It’s the necessary prerequisite for becoming a reflective practitioner. (O’Shaughnessy 2000, 8)

Belief Two: There is no connection between reflective writing and the leadership necessary to create change.

Strong school-level leadership is an absolute necessity for school change. But for those unacquainted with the power of reflective writing, there seems little connection between writing and leadership. However, progressive educational leadership training now routinely utilizes writing about practice and the structured sharing of such writing as a basic technique, under the headings case study, reflection, story, or a combination of all three.

In a recent example, Richard Ackerman and his colleagues have reported on the successful use of “case stories” to involve teachers and administrators in promoting individual growth simultaneously with the building of community and collaboration. Based on the belief that “the story form is a sense-making tool for educators,” Ackerman’s group asks practitioners to “write brief stories of their own experiences, then read them aloud and discuss them with colleagues” according to a formal, four-step method that they describe as “an approach that blends aspects of the conventional case study method with the tradition, artistry, and imagination of storytelling” (Ackerman, Maslin-Ostrowski, and Christensen 1996, 21-23).

Similarly, a major graduate school of education recently devoted an issue of one of its publications to the uses of “reflective case studies” with kindergarten through twelfth grade students, practitioners, and professors. In it are multiple accounts showing the connection between the close observation and reflection such studies require and classroom change. A particular leadership-related use cited is for administrators to achieve a better understanding of teacher roles by writing and discussing nonjudgmental, reflective case studies of teachers in their schools (Thornier and Williams 1996).

Retreat participant Nancy Mohr, for ten years the principal of University Heights, a small alternative high school in the Bronx, sees a strong connection:

• We learn more by reflecting on our own learning than by concentrating on getting others to change;

• There is power in the long haul, in doing our own work over time, developing relationships in order to facilitate more powerful learning;

• As leaders, we need to take better care of ourselves and each other by forming our own communities of learners within which we both support and challenge each other. We must also form communities of learners for others, knowing that they will learn best in small groups and also knowing that much of our work is developing leadership in others. (Mohr et al. 1996)

Belief Three: Teachers’ narratives about their own classrooms are “just storytelling,” a not-very-rigorous and possibly narcissistic endeavor. Writing about reform, if it is to be credible, should be undertaken by those with a view wider than a single classroom or school and a grounding in the theoretical principles upon which reform is based.
In my experience, there is a complex, dynamic relationship between narrative, reflection, the crafting and sharing of emblematic stories, and leadership for change. The importance of anecdote to teachers’ conversations about practice has been analyzed in ground-breaking work by Patricia Stock (1993). In a similar way, well-written practitioner narratives about reform are not “just storytelling” because stories create communities by compelling attention and response, and responsive communities where dialogue is possible create openings for change. Howard Gardner identifies the creation of stories that reflect the issues of a community as a key characteristic of successful leaders, because “stories ... constitute a uniquely powerful currency in human relationships.” The primary purposes of such stories are

- the binding together of a community,
- the tackling of basic philosophical and spiritual questions, and the conferral of meaning on an otherwise chaotic existence... the artful creation and articulation of stories constitutes a fundamental part of the leader’s vocation. Stories speak to both parts of the human mind—its reason and emotion... it is stories of identity—narratives that help individuals think about and feel who they are, where they came from, and where they are headed—that constitute the single most powerful weapon in the leader’s literary arsenal. (Gardner 1995, 42)

Teachers and administrators in reforming schools are being told constantly and in a thousand ways, “You cannot do what you’ve always done. You must change your ways and change them now.” Some welcome change; others resist, actively or passively. All are being called on to forge a new professional identity in a rapidly changing, highly politicized setting. Locally produced and “published” practitioner narratives can be exercises in leadership because they can “help individuals think about and feel who they are, where they came from, and where they are headed.” For this reason, writing created and shared by practitioners within a community of peers, even if it never goes beyond that community, can be an effective component of an overall change process.

In the classroom, at the “bottom of the system,” change is not just about curriculum, assessment, or pedagogy. It’s also about individual people—individual students and their families, individual colleagues next door or down the hall, the new principal and how his personality and decisions affect me as a teacher. Where people are central, stories are central; and the ability to construct emblematic stories that show how individual actions fit (or don’t fit) together into a larger pattern is a way of exercising leadership and promoting change.

Change narratives have another important function. The “fragmentation and overload” (Fullan 1996), which is typical of education, and the resulting lack of motivation are ameliorated by the construction and sharing of narratives of change. Most of us have been influenced in some way by emblematic stories of fictional individuals, such as Ted Sizer’s composite English teacher Horace Smith, or of real individuals such as teacher-astronaut Christa McAuliffe or calculus teacher Jaime Escalante. A similar principle underlies the construction and sharing of narratives by teachers and administrators: we learn from others’ stories and are motivated by them.

This happens because successful stories bind fragments of experience into wholes with coherent shapes and purposes. Maxine Greene argues that such story making and storytelling is intimately connected to teaching, change, and fragmentation:

> It has been said that if we as individuals are to determine what our relationship is to some idea of the good, “we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a ‘quest’... despite or perhaps because of the fragmentation and relativism of our time, it appears that we must reach for conceptions of the good that will affect the direction of our lives... We who are teachers would have to accommodate ourselves to lives as clerks or functionaries if we did not have in mind a quest for a better state of things for those we teach and for the world we all share. It is simply not enough for us to reproduce the way things are. (1995, 1)

Professionals in the “writing world” are familiar with narratives of this type. One of the most effective agents for change in the field of language arts in recent years has been In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents, by Nancie Atwell. Atwell has this to say about the effect of stories and writing on her teaching:

> The word story can be traced to the Greek word eidonai, which means “to know.” As a reader, I look to stories to help me understand and give meaning to my life. As a writer, I tell stories to help me understand,
teaching myself and trying to teach others through the actions and reactions of those "people on the page." This book tells stories because it's the best way I know to reveal myself, my students, my subject... Framing these is my own story, the evolution that brought me out from behind my big desk and allowed students to find their ways inside reading... I didn't intuit or luck into this place, and I didn't arrive overnight. I paved the way through writing and reading about writing, through uncovering and questioning my assumptions, through observing kids and trying to make sense of my observations, through dumb mistakes, uncertain experiments, and underneath it all, the desire to do my best by my kids. (1987, 3-4)

Belief Four: Practitioner-writers represent a small handful of risk-taking, committed educators, heavily tilted towards "verbal" types such as English and social studies teachers, who are not widely representative of the general population of teachers and administrators whose support must be gained if reform is to succeed.

When Grace McEntee and I first started our work, this issue worried us a great deal, and the first group we worked with was certainly dominated by verbally proficient English and social studies teachers. In the second year of the project, we were challenged by colleagues to work with a group of teachers who were undertaking math and science curriculum reform in their schools. These teachers arrived full of misgivings, clearly seeing writing as the English teacher's domain. By the end of their year-long involvement, they had proved to be among the most productive and enthusiastic writers with whom we had worked and also had improved their responding skills. Their knowledge of their subject, dedication to their students, and love of teaching poured into their writing, and the writing carried them into places they never imagined they could enter.

Roz Butziger, a high school science teacher in Rhode Island, wrote this reflection on the distance she had traveled between her first experience with writing in the fall and her experience at a similar retreat the following spring:

The big change for me this time was as a reader. I was paying much closer attention to the writing of other people in my group and giving them much better feedback. At the fall writer's retreat, I felt like I was there under false pretenses. I'm not an English teacher, I'm not a writer, what business did I have reading and responding to other people's writing? Now I have some experience and confidence, and I see that you learn just as much, both as a writer and a teacher, from reading other people's work and helping them improve it as you do from creating your own. (Buztiger 1997)

Roz went on to complete a change narrative that was later published by the Annenberg Institute as part of the Writing Within School Reform series (Buztiger, Hole, and Peters 1997).

Roz's story is not an isolated one, and much of the enthusiasm of the science and math teachers resulted from the opportunity to meet and work with science and math professionals who were also writers. One such mentor was Sylvia Earle, an engineer, a former chief scientist for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and a pioneer in developing deep-water submersibles for ocean research. Sylvia worked with our group for two days and spoke eloquently of her own discovery that if she were to create the kinds of changes in people's attitudes toward the ocean that she thought vital to its survival, she would have to tell her story to as wide an audience as possible. So she literally made herself into a writer, creating (among other titles) the best-selling nonfiction book Sea Change: A Message of the Oceans (1995).

Sylvia pointed out to our group that America is experiencing an explosion of high-quality, nonfiction writing related to math and science—such best-selling authors as Barry Lopez (1986) and Stephen Hawking (1988) come immediately to mind—and that there is a close parallel between what these professionals are doing and the need for teachers engaged in change to write about and share their work with a larger audience. Since then, Grace and I have always included all types of teachers in our work.

Belief Five: Writing about practice is too slow and indirect ever to reach the kind of scale needed to really change schools.

If producing classroom-level change on a wide front remains the elusive goal of school reform, then as reform becomes increasingly institutionalized and top-down, it becomes even more critical for practitioners to become part of the ongoing national conversation. How else will the world at large have a window into what change really looks like at the school level, from the point of view of the people who are actually doing change? How else will teachers take on the necessary role of constructive critics of reform as it unfolds locally?
School reform looks more and more to be a long-haul enterprise, and over the long haul, schools modify reforms as much as reforms change schools, no matter what reformers do (Tyack and Tobin 1994). If practitioner-driven modifications of systemic plans are to be planful and positive rather than spontaneous and subversive, reform initiatives need ways to allow practitioners to question, test, modify, and tune their practice in response to the changes that are being asked of them. Reflective writing about practice has proven itself over time to be one such process, and a highly effective one.

**Conclusions**

Writing can be a powerful force for both individual and organizational change because it makes practitioners reflective actors on multiple levels. On the individual level, writing is a powerful professional development tool that changes the educational practice of the writer, whether teacher or administrator. Edorah Frazer, an English teacher at Souhegan High School in New Hampshire, put it this way at one of our workshops, “My life as a writer deepens my practice as a teacher... Every time I write about my work, I take it and myself more seriously. In looking for the truth, I uncover value in my teaching, my collegial relationships, and in my own capacity to make sense of things I’m involved in.”

On the peer level, writing—often thought of as an isolated and isolating act—in fact can be a powerful builder of reflective communities if suitable supports and structures are provided. Writing in groups creates community, and communities create and sustain change. Writing and sharing changes the stance of the writer in relation to teachers around her. Writer and school reformer Deborah Meier says that writing and sharing her writing helped her to “act, cope, and persuade” in her struggle to create and sustain the Central Park East schools.

On the districtwide, state, and national levels, writing creates an avenue to transform “local knowledge” into “public knowledge” (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993). This is a powerful idea because “opening the classroom doors” is a major part of many reform initiatives. Opening those doors is a means not only to let others in (e.g., peer-observers), but also to let the stories of an individual practitioner in an individual classroom out, in a way that connects that classroom and that story with national reform issues—making local knowledge into public knowledge—and adds a critically needed dimension to the national reform landscape.

At our very first writer’s retreat, teacher-writer JoAnne Dowd asked me a question that has stayed with me ever since: “How come almost everyone who writes about school reform works someplace other than a school?” JoAnne publicly questioned a fact thousands of teachers have privately noted—that in our ongoing national dialogue on school reform, there are few voices from the “bottom” that matter. We are missing the unmediated voice of practitioners who are actually attempting reform, achieving it, failing at it, or partially achieving it and wondering why they haven’t done better. Reflective practitioner narratives about school-based change can help bridge the immense chasm separating well-meaning reform policies developed far from classrooms and the day-to-day reality of the teachers, students, and administrators who must live the policies at the school level.

**References**


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