Writing for the Public: Teacher Editorializing as a Pathway to Professional Development

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Teacher-written editorial columns in local newspapers can challenge the broad, simplistic conceptions of the profession that have been encouraged by contemporary politics and that obscure the real work of teachers. The publication of such columns written by a diverse group of teachers in the West Texas Writing Project has proved an important tool for fostering a stronger sense of professionalism in individual teachers and for promoting their expertise to the lay public and other educators in their community. It has also afforded teachers new models and tools for teaching writing to their own students. This article argues that English Education faculty and teacher-educators are uniquely qualified to help teachers to develop their political voices and write about education issues for the public, and it provides readers with methodologies for preparing teachers to do so. In addition, an analysis of four teacher-written columns sets out specific roles teachers can envision and assume in advocating for school reform and in taking greater ownership over their work. For teachers such as these, an enhanced professionalism that comes from writing for the public about their education objectives is an important step in developing teacher leadership skills.

In one of many troubling moments in *Tested, a Washington Post* reporter's account of a year in a Maryland school forced to adopt a drill-and-kill test preparation culture, a teacher asks, "Why am I getting my masters? It feels like anyone could walk off the street and have my job" (Perlstein, 2007, p. 51). The belief that teaching has been deprofessionalized may be felt particularly acutely by those working in the nation's most struggling schools, but, for reasons that I will later discuss, it is by no means limited to such teachers. This article presents a strategy for countering contemporary political mandates that threaten teacher professionalism as a whole, all the while enabling teachers to "reclai[m] the voice of their teaching lives, and disclai[m] the common public sentiment which discredits the role of these very voices in developing an agenda for reforming education" (Deblase, 2007, p. 117).

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As director of the West Texas Writing Project, the El Paso–based branch of the National Writing Project, I have made what Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) name "capturing the public imagination" central to our mission, largely through the practice of teacher publishing (p. 88). My goal in analyzing why and how I conceived of a teacher publishing project and some of the results found in individual teachers' writings is to show how our work as English educators can create opportunities for teachers to make their professional knowledge, beliefs, and inquiry processes visible and meaningful to the public. While a modified version of this work could happen with preservice teachers, this article focuses on how we might expand the strategies we hold for encouraging classroom practitioners to write about their education goals. Because I know other English educators share my concerns about teacher development and empowerment, I offer here a model that can be adapted to a variety of graduate-level teaching contexts in our field, such as professional writing seminars, special-issue based courses in English education, and courses on writing pedagogy.

More specifically, this article will focus on what I have come to call the Editorial Project, a project in which I mentored more than 30 teachers/graduate students across three Summer Institutes to write 600-word editorial guest columns for submission to our local newspaper. Every summer, each of the fellows—the teachers who participate in the institute—is asked to bring a practice-based question with him or her. These questions are largely focused on the teaching of writing or reading in some way. Together, we read important scholarly work on writing-based teaching and writing-to-learn practices; the fellows also conduct individualized research in response to their question. Out of this shared and individual research, each fellow writes two pieces: an op-ed for the public and a draft of a professional article for other educators. I established the Editorial Project as the product of a larger research effort because I wanted the fellows to consider how professional expertise includes the ability to (1) identify a specific issue or problem in education life that is worthy of further examination; (2) call on both research-based knowledge and practice-based knowledge to address that problem; and (3) develop a compelling theory about what students and schools need. The publication of all but a few of these columns, written by a diverse group of teachers, from elementary to high school and across subject areas, has proved an important tool for fostering a stronger sense of professionalism in teachers. It also made clear to the writers that their ability to successfully advocate for their students is directly tied to their own professional agency.

The process by which the fellows wrote their editorials was important for fostering simultaneously the questioning frame of mind associated with

inquiry and the confidence associated with claiming one's expertise. In contrast to the way in which many of the fellows were used to writing academic papers, we completed a great deal of focused freewriting and other prewriting for the draft in class and we shared this writing publicly. My goal here was to use the editorial as an experiential exercise in writing-to-learn strategies and to provide the fellows with a collaborative and responsive environment that would help them to deepen and sharpen their ideas from early on. For example, in the first days of the institute, I asked students to write four loops about their question itself, to help them to consider why this question should matter to other educators and to the public (Elbow, 1981, pp. 59–77; see also Appendix A). While this writing allowed fellows to explore issues of audience from the start, it also provided them with classroom stories that they could cull for evidence as they approached the draft stage. As always, seeing how other writers went about addressing the same questions was as important to the writers as the feedback they received about their own work. As we approached the draft stage, we read and analyzed several op-eds written by educators and examined the submission guidelines of several newspapers, including our own. Doing so helped us to identify the most important formal and stylistic properties of well-written editorials. Finally, once they wrote their columns, we conducted several draft workshops, adapting Moore's (2009) essay revision prompts to what we knew about editorials to improve their ideas, sharpen their prose, and prepare them for submission (pp. 124–126).

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In all, this process encouraged the fellows to embrace inquiry and revision while writing in a genre that privileges argument and certitude. The combination was important; by holding both intellectual work and education advocacy at its center, the Editorial Project pushed the fellows to investigate their ideas and account for their beliefs. This was a different model of professionalism than many were used to, particularly in a political climate that often requires teachers to subsume both their ideas and beliefs to following the program. For this reason, writing editorials stands to provide teachers with a fuller and richer understanding of how and why they teach and, to paraphrase the teacher in *Tested* (Perlstein, 2007), why they seek graduate training. As many of the editorials that came out of this project reflected, the stakes of thinking more critically about the profession and their role in it are as high for teachers today as ever.

The Political Context of Teacher Editorializing

While the No Child Left Behind Act is framed as a reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, much of the way in which it goes about business is entirely distinct from the body of Great Society legislation that cooperatively set out to address economic and racial disenfranchisement. In asking schools to solve complex social problems on their own, NCLB has left much of this work to rest on teachers' shoulders. At the same time as the legislation has positioned teachers as the solution to closing the achievement gap, however, it has also positioned them as the cause; its focus on teacher deficits has led to new systems of accountability measures, most of which have come to influence the profession without actually supporting it (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2006; Meier & Wood, 2004; Poetter, Wegwert, & Haerr, 2006). As a result, ours is a particularly apt moment for the public to hear from teachers firsthand about the state of teaching and learning in our public schools and for English educators to consider our role in enabling this work. What is needed is more than a simple declaration of expertise, but, in Meier's (1995) words, a means by which teachers can publicly "take responsibility for theirs and their colleagues' teaching" (p. 143). That is, teachers need to do more than critique education politics but must set forth a vision for improving the quality of our public schools, for their students' sake and for their own.

As Meier's (1995) work suggests, the problem of making teacher expertise visible predates NCLB, even if our current legislation exacerbates the issue. Instead, fundamental aspects of the profession have also played a role in teachers' historic struggle to be viewed as experts. Unlike other professionals, Labaree (2004) argues, a good teacher "mak[es] him or herself unnecessary . . . [and] empower[s] learners to learn without the teacher's help" (p. 60). As a result, teacher knowledge is frequently taken for granted, including, at times, by teachers themselves. What teachers have the potential to know, however, is considerable, and far broader than pedagogical strategies and content-based knowledge. Rather, teachers are frequently knowledgeable, experientially and in some cases through inquiry-based study, of the effect of education policy on what they teach, of the impact of extracurricular legislation and political events on whom they teach, and of the influence of educational philosophies on how they teach.

At the same time that teachers' expertise is underestimated, the teaching profession is more dependent on public perception than others largely because the public has a unique economic and political relationship to the

people who work in the nation's schools. The professional-client relationship in education is challenging in part because teachers serve multiple clients at once: their students, their students' parents, and the larger community that benefits or suffers from the quality of education offered to its youth (Labaree, 2004). For this reason, both effective teaching and a public belief that students are being taught effectively are critical for schools to receive the economic and social support that enables successful teaching and learning. In many schools nationwide, this public perception of effective teaching will not come from test scores or any of the other federal and state-mandated approaches to assessing education. To quote from an example that could easily speak to the experience of many teachers in El Paso, helping a bilingual student raise his or her test score from 50 to 199 "counts for nothing" when the state's passing score is 200. Yet, "moving a student from 199 to 200 is success" (Karp, 2004, p. 55). Altogether, this combination of factors sets forth a challenge for teachers to articulate for themselves and their communities the work that they do. For teachers, to do so can and should be more than just a cathartic or strategic experience. Rather, it also should be an exercise in considering how they create success in the classroom, how they set goals for their future work, and the role of writing in both.

Many of the objectives that teachers might set for their classroom practice, from bringing new texts into their classes to teaching an existing part of their curriculum in a new way, require some sort of inquiry and a commitment to deepening their professional knowledge. As studies of the National Writing Project and other programs that support teachers in transforming their classrooms into sites of inquiry have shown, this commitment to learning is key to building a stronger sense of professionalism and professional worth (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Lieberman & Wood, 2002). Yet, a conscious dedication to professional improvement frequently defies both the real conditions of the job and the implicit messages those conditions send to teachers. The "structural isolation within which the teacher has to operate," each working within his or her own classroom, has created a vision of the self-made teacher, a vision in which "teaching comes to be seen as an individual accomplishment," rather than a collaborative venture, and "a natural expression of a teacher's personality" rather than an enactment of disciplinary knowledge and professional expertise (Labaree, 2004, pp. 51–52).

This image of teachers as naturally capable or incapable occludes several important truths about the profession, including the central fact that isolation is not the same thing as autonomy or agency. As Ingersoll (2003) attests, professionals are distinguishable from nonprofessionals in their control

"both collectively and individually, over the conditions, content, processes, outcomes, and evaluation of their work and jobs" (p. 170). Yet, teachers rarely receive this kind of agency or, in Ingersoll's terms, the "structural attributes" common to professionalism; instead, their work is frequently defined by a host of "attitudinal attributes" that teaching requires, including "dedication, diligence, caring, warmth, commitment, and engagement" (p. 59). To be certain, professional development, in any field, depends on attitudinal attributes, including intellectual curiosity or a desire to learn and a capacity for self-reflection or self-assessment (Schön, 1983). But these are attributes that, unlike dedication or warmth, can service others in the profession and the profession as a whole when recognized by the institutions within which individual practitioners work.

These dilemmas indicate that graduate teacher education programs would best serve their students by creating alternative spaces in which teachers might develop and explore questions about professionalism and teacher leadership. Many teachers who seek advanced degrees to improve their classroom practice do so in programs that align with the discipline areas in which they teach, such as English education. This suggests we must develop projects in which teachers investigate and practice philosophies of professionalism and make these projects central to the curricula of such disciplinary programs. All education programs and departments need to prepare teachers to serve as "interactive professionals" or "adaptive agents," that is, teachers who continually develop and learn by working collaboratively with their colleagues, who explain their work to the communities they serve, and who strive to improve the quality of their schools (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 11; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996, p. xi). Teachers who work in this way take greater responsibility for what they teach and how they teach it. Developing interactive professionals requires teacher educators of all kinds, including English educators, to mentor teachers in conceptualizing their work in terms of larger contexts and constituencies than they may be used to taking into account and to create meaningful work in our own classrooms that would enable this. In preparing teachers to bring the world into their classroom and their classroom to the world, we are doing more than making a political statement; we are developing better teachers.

Editorial Writing and the English Education Curriculum

Although developing teachers into more thoughtful and effective practitioners is the central goal of graduate programs in English education, it is equally important that we provide our students with experiences that will

develop them into stronger readers and writers. Such teachers, we must assume, will then be able to share a more informed and integrated knowledge of both with their students. In recent years, scholars have begun to question more critically the teaching of writing in graduate programs and its relationship to academic writing (e.g. Maillon, 2009; Rankin, 1998; Rose, 2010; Rose & McClafferty, 2001). This investigation is especially important for teacher education programs because for most of our students, the master's degree is a terminal degree and a pathway to furthering their professional development rather than a permanent entry into university academics. We are not preparing our students to write dissertations and books (some English education programs do not require graduate students to write theses), nor are we preparing them to publish with the same system of incentive and rewards provided to academic writers. Together, these facts suggest that as English educators, we frequently need to create different kinds of writing projects for our students than we completed in our own graduate training.

I designed the Editorial Project to build on my foundational beliefs that writing is central to a successful humanities teachers' pedagogy and that it can serve as a vehicle for professional, political, and community activism. For teachers who embrace and maintain the philosophy that writing proficiency and practice can make for more effective teaching, their own writing often becomes a classroom model and resource. Even if only journaling or freewriting with their students, such teachers enact the writing-based pedagogies as set out by Emig (1977), Elbow (1981), Murray (1972, 1996), and others. Yet the difference between teachers who are active writers, in and outside of the classroom, and those who are not, Robbins (1992) has found, "has less to do with [teachers'] opportunities than with their beliefs about such weighty concepts as the nature of writing and learning, their roles as English teachers, and even the nature of knowledge itself" (p. 74). In short, many teachers do not consider the writing they do, in whatever form, to be "real" writing. The Editorial Project requires teachers not just to think of themselves as writers but also to willingly take on the role of public writers in the broadest sense of the term. For this reason, and unlike many other development opportunities available to teachers, interest in writing to the public—even if that interest is understandably complicated with self-doubt and fear—is more essential to the success of this project than the teacher's years of experience.

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Little of my own graduate work prepared me to think about my research in terms of the public. The reality is that as a full-time PhD student, making my work relevant to and visible in a scholarly community was considered enough. For teachers, this is often not enough; my graduate students are equally concerned with how to develop more productive relationships with their students and students' families as with their colleagues. It is for this reason that I require my students to write their editorials in conjunction with a draft of a professional article and that I ask them to consider the two pieces of writing as two different responses to the same question. Together, these two projects work as an important exercise in audience—an exercise that is critical to teachers' daily work precisely because they must be able to explain their pedagogical beliefs and strategies to their administrators, their students, and their students' parents. In addition, the juxtaposition of the two writing projects is meant to remind teachers that all of their work—regardless of to whom it is addressed—should be grounded in inquiry and research from the classroom and from the academy. In fact, their goal is to connect scholarly research to their classroom practice and, explicitly or implicitly, convey the importance of this connection to a lay audience.

The manageability of the Editorial Project offers a final important feature of its design, one that I may have underestimated at first but have come to value all the more over time. In general, helping students to draft an article from the inquiry-development phase to the publication-submission stage is difficult, if not impossible, in a semester. Much of the time, if we do not specifically build revision into our courses, we receive from students carefully edited first drafts more than radically revised, further developed drafts. Although I know that many of the teachers I work with see great value in writing for their professional community, they have difficulty fitting that kind of work into their professional lives. This is the case all the more often with great teachers, many of whom go above and beyond in their commitments to their students and their schools after hours. When the choice is dedicating themselves to the people before them or an article that can be easily ignored, the outcome is usually obvious.

While this quandary raises questions about the positionality of professional writing in the teaching field, it also suggests that there is important value in developing writing projects for teachers that can be seen to completion, that can have an impact on their regional and professional communities, and that can give them a broader and more whole experience of writing. The Editorial Project does something in my curriculum that no other writing project does: It allows writers to engage the entire writing process,

from focused freewriting to drafting and radical revision in the course of a semester. This experience has great value not just in my students' estimation of their writing but in their firsthand knowledge of the writing process. Because revision is such an integral part of the writing process, a project that requires students to revise for content invites them to assume the role of writers, rather than simply students who write (Harris, 2003; Sommers, 1980). Teachers who have had this experience, I believe, are more fully prepared to teach writing and to use writing to teach content.

I offer all of these explanations to students when I introduce the project at the beginning of the institute or the semester. Repeatedly, however, the comments students write on my instructor evaluations suggest that it is the political aspect of this writing and the way in which it invites them to assume leadership roles in their community—to counter negative images of the profession and to claim a public voice—that remain most exciting to them. As you will see in the following editorial case studies, all of the writers share an engagement in a kind of professional writing that allows them to report on the state of public education from the inside and to provide different kinds of information than typically exchanged at parent-teacher conferences or open houses. In fact, they demonstrate that editorializing allows them to declare and refine their beliefs as practitioners and to critique the state of teaching and learning in their schools for the sake of improving it.

Editorials as Forums for Professional Development: Four Case Studies

When teachers have the opportunity to write for the public, what do they choose to write about? Analyzing several of the published editorials from the project provides a view into the spectrum of choices that teachers make. As this section will show, what each of the teachers chose to write about became connected to larger questions of how they wanted to frame their arguments, what they wanted to critique, and what they wanted to come out of writing an editorial. In their columns, individual teachers played various roles, including pedagogical expert, education activist, policy critic, and community organizer. They located sites of inquiry in their own teaching, their colleagues' teaching, students' performances, state-mandated reforms, and community beliefs and practices.

I should also note that unlike many typical English education courses, Writing Project Summer Institutes tend to attract teachers from across the curriculum. While three of the following case study writers are teachers of reading and writing across grade levels and one a teacher of mathematics,

all see writing instruction as central to improving teaching and to their views of themselves as teachers. If this diversity of students does not reflect our typical teaching experience, it should not detract from the larger argument about the importance and effectiveness of this kind of writing and what makes it so. These case studies suggest that including such writing projects in our coursework might further expand and increase the value of English education programs to the universities and public schools we serve.

Ana: Community and Cultural Critic

As a means of going public and sharing their work, each teacher reads his or her finished editorial to the institute on the last day. The fellows are always genuinely eager to hear the final products of their shared labor. After our reading in 2008, almost all of the fellows commented that Ana's editorial was the bravest. Ana Diaz, a young Mexican American teacher at one of the city's high schools, had focused her research on studying more interactive approaches to teaching grammar to English Language Learners in her literature classes. After just a few years of teaching, she realized that grammar instruction could not be an occasional unit divorced from literature instruction but that each day in her classroom needed to provide students with an invitation to think about grammar. She described feeling both empathetic to her students' struggles with language but also overwhelmed by them.

Ana's editorial gave her the opportunity to explore some of these struggles and to step outside of her thinking about specific pedagogical methods to notice how events surrounding her school both reflected and enabled the experiences she and her students were having within it. To do so, she describes in her column the experience of driving home from work and noticing "a huge hand-painted sign on a major street that said, 'Loose weight fast!'" She reads this experience as a fairly typical one, for, as she states, "We see signs all the time in the El Paso area that contain misspelled words or are grammatically incorrect in some other form or fashion, and we often fail to think twice about them. As a matter of fact, many times we are not even cognitively aware that there is something amiss." Nor are schools themselves absent from this phenomenon, for, Ana testifies, she "[has] even encountered invitations passed out by teachers to their students' parents with the words 'Your invited!' in bold print on the cover" (Diaz, 2008, p. 7B). In her attention to these everyday mishaps, she embraces and models the way in which she wants her students to notice and think about grammar every day, not just in isolated grammar lessons.

What troubles Ana, as she explains it, is not just the message that these various mistakes send about the seeming unimportance of language to members of the community, including her students, but what they say about the community itself. On the border, she writes, "we have many success stories of people who have struggled and overcome great difficulties in an attempt to live the American dream. Sometimes we see those grammatically incorrect signs over family-owned businesses and think that just because El Paso is a border town with many of the inhabitants being bilingual, it is quite all right if the English we display isn't perfect." Ana wants to see her students embrace a different belief. "As a bilingual American myself," she explains, "I believe we Hispanics have to doubly prove ourselves. Being bilingual does not mean that we semi-know two languages, but rather that we have mastery of both" (Diaz, 2008, p. 7B). In so doing, she steps into a host of controversial political issues in her community, issues that are intrinsically tied to parental beliefs about their children's schooling, students' objectives for their own education, and district funding to support programs oriented at making every student proficient in both languages.

The other fellows commented on Ana's ability to name a problem they all witnessed with some regularity and, at the same time, applauded her courageousness in her positioning of herself as a critic of her own community. In the end of her editorial, Ana argues, "If the correct/incorrect use of the English language in our area really has become no big deal, maybe it should be addressed as a big deal. If we want the rest of the nation to respect us, to learn from the example of our hard-working community, then we ought to begin paying some attention to correct grammar use in what we write" (Diaz, 2008, p. 7B). In her convictions, Ana argues as powerfully as any literature on school reform could that communities are essential to and responsible for supporting their schools. That is, schools do not just serve communities; communities must also contribute to creating conditions for positive teaching and learning in whatever ways they can. Even everyday events send out important political messages to students and, as her unfortunate example of the invitation indicates, their teachers. In so doing, Ana defies clichés of school-community relationships to argue for specific ways in which community members might make a difference in the quality of education that teachers can provide.

Chrissy: A Partner to Parents

Answering questions about audience came easily to Chrissy Beltran, a fourth-grade teacher. She came to the Summer Institute interested in the gaps she

saw between her students' spoken vocabularies, which were often complex and varied, and their written ones, which were more often simplistic and repetitive. At the root of this problem was students' differing ability to receive language (through listening and reading) and to produce it (through speaking and writing). She decided in drafting her editorial that she wanted to educate her readers about this vocabulary gap; in her experience, she read, many parents assume that because their children are verbal, they must be natural writers as well. What she wanted parents to do with this information, however, was more difficult for her to name.

In part, Chrissy's challenge came not in interesting her readers in issues of language instruction but, in fact, in redirecting longstanding conversations about this topic. As Ana reflected, bilingualism and language acquisition often are not merely topics of academic interest in our city. Ask an El Pasoan his or her view of how children best learn English, and you will get an answer expressed with conviction, often based on his or her own experiences as a student, experiences that vary depending on the speaker's language background. Because the vocabulary problem Chrissy witnessed is shared among students of all language backgrounds, however, she wanted to be clear that her argument was not directed to select parents. "How many students sit in a classroom, inundated with the sound of words belonging to the teacher, but repeating the same stale vocabulary when it comes to their own communication?" she asks her reader early on. "My guess is, more than you'd think." Students, she contends, "have been exposed to huge quantities of words in conversation, through reading and media. But when it comes to actually using these words in speaking and writing, they fall short of the huge vocabularies they have been swimming in." Part of the problem, Chrissy instructs her readers, is its deceptiveness. "Using students' reading vocabularies as an indicator of their writing vocabularies," she warns, "is a huge mistake. Students have become good word-spitters." The stakes for parents and teachers to see through these illusions are high, both for the sake of individual children and for the community at large, because "Every day that passes is one too many in which our children are lagging behind." "In order for [students] to compete in an ever-growing marketplace with professionals around the world who are multilingual in three or more languages," she explains to concerned parents, "we, at the very least, must provide them with a solid foundation of words" (Beltran, 2008, p. 7B).

Over time, Chrissy decided that she wanted to appeal directly to parents for their help. Hers was not a problem of state-level politics or curriculum mandates, she determined, but a failure of awareness on the part of the adults who educate children, in school and outside of it. For this reason,

she argued, the solution to the problem needed to be shared between teachers, all of whom "must create meaningful and exciting opportunities for children to take ownership over new words and incorporate them into their vocabularies," and parents who "must look for ways to increase the written communication they have with their children and schools" (Beltran, 2008, p. 7B). This was the most difficult part of crafting the editorial for her, as she described it; she knew that she wanted to get parents involved, but she also knew that busy parents might not spend much time writing with their children. Nor are all parents fluent writers themselves.

Chrissy's column, and her establishment of the problems with young students' vocabularies as a matter of potential partnership between teachers and parents, is in many ways a first step that asks for follow-up and expansion. In particular, Chrissy opened the door to write future pieces on what, specifically, parents might do to enlarge their children's written vocabularies. As many of the teachers I work with have attested, most parents want to be involved with their children's education, but some just do not know how. Chrissy also opened the door to thinking about how she might enable a community-classroom connection through assignments that invite parents to write with their children. If "phrases referring to parental involvement or treating parents as partners are becoming clichés of education reform" (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001, p. 44), Chrissy's editorial offers an example of how other teachers might reach out to parents and invite them to become active participants in the teaching and learning process. At the same time, parents who read her editorial might be compelled to discuss with teachers their own concerns and observations about their children's writing.

Chrissy's editorial, like the others, reflects the ways in which she has made her classroom into what Meier (1995) calls "a laboratory of learning," not just for students but for teachers (p. 140). In her column, Chrissy describes the way in which studying her students led her to identify a challenge in her own teaching practice. In the process, she also models for other teachers how problems in the classroom need not be read as teacher deficiencies or sites for self-blame. While teachers of all levels might despair at their students' simplistic written vocabularies or sentence structures, Chrissy offers a contrasting charge that "We must expect that children can and will become avid gobblers of words, who will take on building vocabulary as a challenge and a necessity" (Beltran, 2008, p. 7B). More than just an optimistic statement of belief, Chrissy's editorial presents a challenge of responsibility and accountability to teachers and parents alike, one that other teachers might find inspiring and empowering at once.

Melinda and Torsten: Fighters for Reform

Although each of the editorials the teachers wrote argued for change in teaching and learning practices, both the problems they identified and the stakes of those problems varied considerably. So, too, did the way in which the writers constructed their problems as urgent enough to demand public attention. In all likelihood, the problem Chrissy focused on was not new to her classroom so much as it was new to her understanding of her classroom. This realization of an important dynamic in her students' language development led her to focus primarily on making her realization clear to others. In contrast, Melinda Cofield and Torsten Knauerhase both located their problems less in their own practices than in the ways in which contemporary politics have come to affect their practices. As a result, both of them ended up positioning themselves as fighters for education reform not just in individual classrooms but in schools and in education systems as a whole.

Though Chrissy's editorial was specific and directed, its tone and its appeal to parents made it unlikely to offend any of its readers. Melinda, a high school mathematics teacher, took a riskier approach in her editorial, constructing an argument that was critical of both an education culture of testing and some of her colleagues' resignation to this culture in their pedagogy. Interestingly, this choice arose from Melinda's struggle in translating the ideas of her professional article, which focused on strategies for using writing to help students process mathematical concepts, into a meaningful argument for the public. The initial motivation for her inquiry about writing-to-learn in the math classroom was a desire for her students to consider how the math they were learning in her class was relevant to their lives. Getting them to do so was difficult in large part, she realized, because "many math classes are teaching students to regurgitate what's going to be on some standardized test rather than how to think." Yet, she states, "teaching the tricks to get the easy answer rather than trying to understand the concepts is not true learning" (Cofield, 2008, p. 7B).

While Chrissy framed the responsibility for the problem in her editorial as shared between teachers and parents, Melinda saw hers as more centrally located within the profession itself, between those who surrender to teaching to the test, consciously or not, and those such as herself who want to "demonstrate that math is a part of our everyday lives." Because her problem has two parts to it—students' inability to appreciate math and some teachers' exacerbation of that problem in teaching to the test—so does her solution. Writing in the math classroom, she argues, can enable students to see that "our slumping economy and rising oils prices are evidence that we

engage with math everyday" and can "help [students] understand our global economy, teach them how to think outside the box, interpret the vast array of available information, develop good citizenship and build communication and people skills" (Cofield, 2008, p. 7B). At the same time, writing in the math classroom addresses the problem of students being "force-fed material when they need to be taught how to think and problem-solve" (p. 7B).

"Writing is the key to teaching effectively," Melinda concludes in her editorial, "not just preparing students for a state-mandated test, but going back to our mission, which is preparing students for life" (Cofield, 2008, p. 7B). In the end, Melinda takes a problem that is usually constructed as a battle between teachers and education policy and makes it into one of personal choice. Her earlier excitement in researching further ways in which writing can be an effective tool in the mathematics classroom comes through in her declarations of belief that students can find math of personal relevance rather than just academic subject matter and in her sharp critique of teachers who choose not to build this sense of relevance.

Her conclusion allows Melinda to claim expertise in a few different ways, as a practitioner of a specific kind of pedagogy, as a critic of current education politics and its effect on the classroom, and as someone who understands the real mission of public schools, a mission that is subverted every day. Melinda assumes in her editorial the kind of professional role that Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) have named as "refusing to mind your own business" and is "an act of moral courage that leads you to question colleagues or parents whenever you see them do harm to students . . . [and] to create collaborative cultures among teachers where teachers support one another but also hold each other accountable" (p. 100). This refusal to mind one's own business and to advocate change can offend other teachers regardless of tone. As Silva, a published teacher describes, "As a teacher trying to write from within and about her workplace, I am struggling to be honest, open, fair, protective. I recognize that my words about my work will affect colleagues and change my relationship with them in subtle and not-so-subtle ways" (quoted in McEntee, 1998, p. 24). From early on in the writing process, Melinda realized that she was willing to risk some of those relationships to begin a conversation with teachers of like mind.

This desire to openly critique does not necessarily have to come at the cost of low-performing teachers, however. Torsten's research on drama as a pedagogical device in the elementary school classroom led him to write an editorial about the loss of arts funding as struggling schools like his own narrow their curricula. "The concern about the rising numbers of students who fail their mandated tests," he explains early in his piece, "has led to the

demise or even elimination of the arts in our educational system" (Knauerhase, 2008, p. 7B). Like Melinda, Torsten saw the pedagogical methods he was researching and experimenting with in his classroom as unsupported in schools more generally, and this was problematic to him. But, also like Melinda, he sees in this lack of support a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of politicians and, perhaps, other educators and parents who stand by and watch the demise of the arts curriculum with little sense of regret. Making the arts a central part of the curriculum is important not just to teach students to "appreciate a painting by DaVinci, a play by Shakespeare or a symphony by Mozart" but also to make other academic subject matter relevant. "DaVinci was not only an artist he was also a scientist and inventor," he reminds readers. "Students can look at a painting of this famous artist and discover the angles he used to create the picture. This will lead them into the discovery of geometric figures." Likewise, "Mozart's compositions and scores can be used to introduce fractions" (Knauerhase, 2008, p. 7B).

Torsten's editorial is in many ways like Melinda's in that what he sees at stake in his argument is the necessity to "enhance [students'] understanding of the concepts instead of asking them to memorize facts they cannot relate to real life situations" and the need to "[allow] students to go beyond the obvious" by exploring "a concept and expand[ing] on it" (Knauerhase, 2008, p. 7B). His is as much a policy statement as it is a pedagogical one, and orienting his critique toward politics rather than professional performance might seem to make his argument less likely than Melinda's to draw critical responses from other teachers. It also puts less emphasis on its teacher-readers to assume responsibility for change in their individual classrooms, though they clearly could do so by giving more attention to the arts in their teaching. While the comments he received from his colleagues and principal were positive, those of some of his readers were not. Torsten reported receiving several online responses from readers, with varying levels of hostility, who assumed he wanted the arts curriculum financed at the cost of football programs. In response, Torsten commented, "Reading and hearing the responses was scary at times, because it revealed, to a certain degree, the misconceptions about the arts and the hostility towards them. Is football really more important than the appreciation and the use of the arts? Why do people want you to choose between them?" (personal communication, August 3, 2008). His experience reminds us that for teachers to argue publically for school reform is always a courageous act. Resistance can come from unforeseen places, even in response to the most constructive statements of belief. As Torsten's work shows, to become a public writer requires an acceptance of this resistance on some level.

From Writers to Leaders

Ultimately, the larger import of this project is in the questions about professional practice it raises for teachers and the educators who prepare them, including the following: Why and how can teachers' writing address misperceptions of the profession and issues of teacher expertise? How can teachers speaking out lead to further opportunities to build school and community relationships? What do teachers risk in taking on this responsibility? Implicit in each of these questions is a claim that teacher professionalism cannot be passive or contained to individual teachers' classrooms or schools. Nor can it be stagnant. As with any profession, teachers must be constant learners, revising and developing their ideas while at the same time articulating and practicing what they know (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Lieberman, 1988). Making public what they have learned and taking responsibility for it is essential to gaining a more empowered position in public school culture and design. Teachers who "draw on their own experience and knowledge to enter the national conversation" can then change that public conversation from a discussion of "*accounting of learning* geared to an audience of legislatures and policymakers" to one of "*accountability for learning* geared to an audience of parents and communities" (Lieberman & Miller, 2004, p. 12; emphasis original). In other words, teachers are our best resource for making current conversations about education more meaningful, more intellectual, and more productive. While it is too optimistic to imagine that a small group of published editorials can reframe public discussions of teaching and learning entirely, this project assumes it is altogether possible and necessary for teachers to set the example for doing so within their communities.

For some teacher-writers, taking greater ownership of one's work and facilitating a public conversation about education promises to do more than enhance a sense of professionalism but also to develop them into teacher leaders. Though "teacher leader" can hold different meanings in specific situations, it most frequently is conceived of as teachers who take on important roles in improving their schools while remaining classroom practitioners (York-Barr & Duke, 2004, pp. 260–261). By this definition, leadership is dependent on the institutional recognition of the professional skills that individual teachers can develop and have been described here. Specifically, teacher leadership positions in schools—from mentoring to chairing departments to serving on committees with the power to make decisions for their schools—require administrators to value teachers' abilities to pursue further study of their field (formally and informally), set professional goals

and objectives, and communicate about their ideas with their colleagues, their students, and their communities.

The experiences of the teachers who were published through the Editorial Project reflect the ways in which administrators can make use of the columns to support their faculty and shape leaders in their schools. For example, one principal immediately copied and disseminated his teacher's editorial to the entire faculty, generating much praise from her colleagues. Another, in a more effective strategy toward building teacher leadership, made time in a faculty meeting for his teacher to explain why and how she wrote her column and to invite other teachers to respond to her ideas. This kind of experience is typical in schools where teachers play a vital role in forming a productive, collaborative academic culture.

As with any other exercise in developing teacher leadership, it is important to remember that neither individual editorials nor one-time conversations about those editorials are enough to create teacher leaders. As Fullan (1994) warns, many teacher leadership projects are superficially conceived and implemented, and leadership opportunities "tend to be confined 'projects' rather than wider institutional reform strategies" (pp. 243, 244). As a result, existing teacher leadership roles tend to profit the individual teachers who occupy these positions more than they do the entire profession. To make the most of teacher leadership experiences, both for teacher leaders and for those they lead, the experiences need to be strategic steps in a process rather than end points. Integrating teachers' professional development experiences into the classroom and into their work outside of the classroom is necessary both for teachers and for those who support their development as educators, thinkers, and writers. I conceived of the Editorial Project with this notion of continuity in mind and have supported the teacher-writers in thinking about how to make use of their editorials in multiple ways. One writer presented her work at a national conference, while two others applied to a National Writing Project–sponsored writing retreat to expand their ideas into further pieces of writing. Several other teachers have commented to me that they think differently about their role as political advocates for their students and have become more involved in local education politics. While all of these events have taken place outside of the classroom, they have the potential to improve what happens within it by further developing the teachers as writers and advocates for themselves and their students.

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To be certain, continuity can take place in the classroom, as well. Teachers are some of the most important models for their students of writers in action. In writing with their students, and at times sharing that writing, teachers convey to students a host of important beliefs and attitudes about writing. Each of the teachers whose editorial was published as part of this project has an invaluable artifact to bring back to his or her classroom, to model for students the ways in which writing has real-world purpose and to begin a discussion about the process of writing for publication. Such teachers can then lead their students through this same process, enabling them to write about their own educational beliefs (or any number of other issues) for publication. Teachers who submitted editorials but were not published might consider doing the same; in addition, the teacher-writers might revisit and revise their editorials in light of students' feedback. In both cases, teachers can use their own writing to propel their classrooms in new directions and to encourage students to make their own learning visible to a reading audience. Even online publication of students' editorials can set examples for other practitioners and can begin collaborative conversations between teachers about developing authentic and interesting assignments.

Classroom use of the editorials is just one of the potential next steps that the guest columns set out for their writers. As in the cases of Chrissy and Melinda, teachers can be compelled to reexamine their classroom practices in light of their opinion pieces and to consider any changes they would like to make. The networks such teachers develop with each other in drafting and revising their editorials might serve as support when they draft and implement new plans for their classrooms. Teachers now experienced in making connections with their community members can deepen those connections in a number of ways, from developing place-based curricula to developing classroom projects that invite (or require) parental involvement (e.g., Benson & Christian, 2002; Sobel, 2004). Additionally, writing editorials can compel individual teachers to write more or to write other kinds of pieces. Organizations that work with teachers, such as National Writing Project sites, can attempt to establish ongoing relationships with local newspapers so that their opinion pages regularly set aside space for a teacher-written column.

To a large degree, teachers who pursue graduate education or other long-term professional development opportunities are the self-selected teacher leaders of tomorrow. This is not to say that every teacher who seeks an advanced degree, or any teacher who publishes an editorial, will automatically have the makings to serve as a leader in his or her school. Leadership demands both a context that allows teachers to advocate for reform or improvement and the effort and skill on the part of practitioners to do so. But

those of us who hope to prepare teachers to assume such roles do not always know who will or will not move beyond personal professional development to play an active role in improving education beyond individual classrooms, and so we must plan as if they all might. Much of the time, teachers come to us more able to articulate what they do not want from the profession than what they do because the opportunities and possibilities are difficult to envision within the routines of daily work life in public schools. Many of the teachers in the West Texas Writing Project who wrote editorials commented at various times to me that writing for the public required them to rethink how they communicated their experiences and tested them to think about how they might make an impact in their schools. Nurturing this self-awareness of one's classroom practice, along with improving literacy instruction, lies at the heart of English education.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge, however, the ways in which teaching these kinds of writing projects can be important and energizing to us as English educators. The structured ways in which institute fellows went about drafting and revising their work for publication suggests one reason why this work is particularly well-suited to a classroom project. So, too, does the impact of a body of editorials, however large or small, published in a short timeframe. One guest column written by a teacher may attract the notice of local newspaper readers. One column published every week for almost two months, in this case, attracted it all the more. Many of us have left former careers as English teachers because we wanted to make a bigger impact on public school life, and yet we frequently find ourselves one step removed from it. Seeing institute fellows published was as exciting to me as it was to them and offered me the opportunity to play an important, concrete role in changing the way in which our culture thinks about teachers. In designing a writing assignment for my classroom that would have a life outside of it, I, too, got to serve as an interactive professional and to see my visions of education reform in print, for all of the public to read.

Appendix A: Writing Prompts to Prepare to Write Editorials on Education Issues

Version A

These prompts were adapted from Elbow's (1981) work on loop writing (pp. 59–77).

1. Write your first thoughts on a question that is important to you as a teacher right now.

2. Tell the story of how this question lives in your classroom. Create a vivid scene.
3. What misconceptions or lies have you been told about this question or in response to this question?
4. Explain this question's importance to someone who is not an educator. You can choose who that person might be (a student, a parent, a school board member).

Version B

1. What is a problem that is important to you as a teacher right now and why?
2. Why is this problem important to parents or taxpayers? What is their investment in it?
3. What do you want parents or taxpayers to know about the problem that they don't already know?

Notes

1. In the Summer Institute, we often share our responses to the prompts in Version A as we go along as a means to break up the long, sustained writing period and to give us ideas for our own writing in progress. I offer Version B here as a more concise alternative if time is an issue, but Version A offers the benefit of generating more evidence in the form of anecdotes and stories that can later be used in the editorials. Either version might be used to help writers pinpoint gaps in their knowledge. In the Summer Institute, the writing that comes out of these prompts helps teachers to identify what they need to research further before drafting their editorials.

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