I was not born a teacher. I didn’t pursue the profession in high school or college. I became a teacher after having worked in another field for over 20 years. In my first year of teaching I struggled with many of the same issues that all new teachers struggle with: classroom management, curriculum, meeting standards and preparing students for the STAR test. It is how we face those challenges that determine what kind of a teacher we become.

For me, as I struggled those first few months of teaching, I was guided gently by a caring teacher who reached out and suggested that I attend a free Saturday workshop being offered by the Great Valley Writing Project, our local chapter of the California Writing Project. The job was already overwhelming my home life, with papers to grade in the evenings and lessons to plan each weekend but I decided to attend the Saturday workshop because I knew I needed help engaging my students. The short three hour session stimulated both my lesson book and my passion for teaching. I came away that first Saturday with strategies I could use the following Monday. I began looking forward to watching my students engage in activities that were both fun and relevant. That first year I attended each monthly Saturday workshop. It was like a day at the spa for me. After a long week of teaching I spent three hours being a student, remembering how much I love to learn, working through the activities as a participant and then putting them into practice in my own classroom. I was put in the student’s desk and I was paying attention to how I was learning, what helped me to understand a concept better, how to break down and “chunk” the content into manageable pieces for my students.

These “spa days” made me more enthusiastic about teaching. I was able to meet a variety of teachers. Some were new, like me, but many were veterans. Each time I attended a workshop I found myself sitting beside teachers who were equally curious about new ways to make learning meaningful to their students. Together we shared what was going on in our classrooms, who our students were and how to connect our content to their world. In the staff lounge, while talking to my colleagues, I began to share both my enthusiasm for the art of teaching as well as the idea that we all have something to learn from each other. I asked questions; I listened. I was lucky to have landed my first job in a school where teachers supported each other so warmly. I knew that the direction of my practice had been greatly influenced by a gently nudge from a veteran teacher and so I tried to pass that nudge on to others. Always gently.

In my fourth year of teaching I was recruited as a literacy coach at our school working with fourth through eighth grade teachers. My new job, as I saw it, was not to show teachers how to present their material but to get them to talk to each other and reflect on what works in their classrooms and what doesn’t. I had no plans of stepping out of the classroom permanently. For me the job was a unique opportunity to observe other teachers in their classrooms and get them to start talking and sharing ideas with each other. During those two years of coaching I watched teachers move from working in isolation, afraid that a fellow teacher would see them doing something wrong, to literally
opening their doors and feeding off of each other. This was the model I was exposed to over and over again at the GVWP- teachers teaching teachers. And it works. The teachers I worked with as a coach began sharing ideas, admitting to difficulties and working together to offer support and alternatives. Together we realized that no one person held all the answers. Veterans as well as new teachers began to trust each other enough to share strategies. As coach, I was lucky enough to be the facilitator, clearing time for teachers to have those conversations. And I’m happy to say that many of the teachers began to attend GVWP workshops.

After two years of coaching I found myself at a new school with a new curriculum and a new grade level. I was out of my element in so many ways. It had been two years since I had stood before a room full of students and I felt rusty and inadequate. These students were considerably older, smarter and I felt like a fraud. Did I know this curriculum well enough to teach it? Yikes! Shakespeare! Everything in my world was new. I was overwhelmed.

On top of this, I was asked to sit in on the Literacy Committee and help develop the next Staff Development workshops. I was being identified as a teacher leader but at the moment all I wanted to do was to close my door and get a handle on my curriculum. I recognized that I was struggling, so within the school I located teachers who had participated in GVWP workshops and found they were sympathetic to my frustrations and willing to help with ideas and strategies. Reaching out and asking for help I began to get my footing again. Forgotten strategies resurfaced. I felt supported by my fellow teachers. By chance, toward the end of my first term I was asked to fill in as the host for a GVWP Saturday workshop. It had been a year or so since I had attended a workshop, but the attributes that I found so rewarding my first years of teaching were still being presented one Saturday each month. Participating with the rest of the teachers I left the workshop with new ideas and a renewed confidence. This time the effect was like going to a filling station and feeling full and ready for a new journey.

As I found myself struggling in front of the classroom it seemed ironic that I was being identified in my new school as a teacher leader. At that moment it was not my ability, or my lack of ability that was being noticed but the way I chose to handle my struggle. Instead of closing my door and fearing someone would notice I was doing it all wrong I reached out and found a network of support. I began having conversation with my peers about how they approached the curriculum. We began sharing ideas. My network of support popped right up into place. Programs like the Saturday Series give teachers the confidence to reflect on what we do in our classrooms. We become a network of teachers questioning how we present our content to our students. And quietly, sometimes without even realizing it, we come back to our schools and offer help and encouragement to our peers.

For me, the learning never stops. The network of teachers who are willing to share ideas oozes out of the classroom and spreads across the campus, the district, the state. Four years ago the GVWP recognized a need for advanced Teacher Consultants to meet and share what they were doing at their school sites and in their classrooms. Under the guidance of co-directors Carol Minner and Stephanie Paterson the Professional Leadership Learning Academy (PLLA) was born. For three intensive days each summer a group of 20-25 veteran teachers meet to share where their inquiries are leading them. We committed to book studies, looked into the California Common Core Standards, discussed the challenges, the frustrations, and our successes. PLLA has become a place of rededication to the strategies we know work for our students as we teach critical thinking and analytical writing in a world of standardized testing. It has become a place of rejuvenation for that love of learning that is often buried under mound of essays faced during the school year. I’ve just entered my tenth year of teaching and I attribute the enthusiasm with which I still approach my work to this network of teachers teaching teachers.

**About the Author:**

Janet Lenards currently teaches AP Literature, AP Language and Senior English at Sierra High School in Manteca. She received a New Educator Award her second year of teaching.

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