

Building a Community of Teacher-Writers

In our work with *Kaleidoscope: Educators' Voices and Perspectives*, a journal written and edited by teachers and published by the Knowles Teacher Initiative, we noticed developing teacher-writers were uncertain about their ability to craft stories that were “publication worthy” because they assumed that *good* writers’ stories flowed effortlessly onto the page. To debunk this common misconception, we needed to create a space where teachers could develop confidence in their voice and explore their identities as teacher-writers and storytellers. The staff of *Kaleidoscope* launched the first online **writing retreat** in 2016, thanks to funding provided through a **Knowles Teacher Initiative Seed Grant**. Since then, we have brought 25 teacher-writers together to tell and write their stories during in-person meetings and videoconferences spaced throughout the year.

As the third annual writing retreat comes to a close, we have come to appreciate that when teacher-writers support each other throughout the writing process, they are better equipped to do the deeply personal work that is essential to writing stories that faithfully represent their practice, their knowledge, and their professional growth. To cultivate conditions necessary for this level of teacher-writer collaboration, facilitators (including Rebecca) meet with teachers in small groups and position themselves as co-participants who are eager to hear their stories, willing to be vulnerable with them, and open to seeking and receiving support as we write with them.

The simple act of sharing experiences and hearing from others how teachers’ stories resonate has proved to be a powerful approach to nurturing the development of teachers’ voices and their confidence in what they have to share when they put pen to paper. And so, participants and facilitators begin the retreat by telling each other our stories during “walk and talks,” guided by protocols that draw out our lived experiences and reduce feelings of risk and vulnerability. When we meet online throughout the year, we identify points of resonance in our stories, we ask questions, we comment, and we collaborate in the process of writing by sharing our stories-in-progress.

Our experiences with teacher-writers during the writing retreat have helped us to understand that identity work is an essential step in the storytelling and writing process; what we share in stories is both personal and professional, and entails

examining how we see ourselves as teachers. Likewise, having the support of other teachers as we tell and write our stories eases the heavy emotional lifting involved because teachers know what it means to “be” a teacher. For example, Max (pseudonym), a participant in the 2018 writing retreat, shared that with the encouragement of their writing group, “I’ve been able to ‘pull back the layers of the onion’...[to think about] my motivation to teach, what I do with my students and my relationships with my colleagues.” Like Max, other retreat participants describe writing retreat meetings as time set aside to fearlessly explore emotions, examine dispositions, figure out relationships with students and colleagues, and reflect on teaching decisions.

We also recognize that because the writing retreat is designed to support reflection and inspire conversation, teachers experience storytelling and writing as opportunities to discover how they can improve their teaching practice and better support students’ learning together. As protagonists in their own stories of teaching, teacher-writers explain their thinking, rationalize their decisions, and share what they have learned with their writing groups; in other words writing with other teachers encourages retreat participants to think about their thinking. For example, Andy (pseudonym), an Advanced Placement Biology teacher and participant in the 2016 retreat, reconceived their biology course as a story and in doing so, provided students a novel way to access challenging content. According to Andy, “That emphasis on stories has transformed teaching and learning in my classroom...[t]hinking of [the central dogma] as a storyline meant I strongly emphasized the context of these processes...it was a huge hook for my learners this year.” Other writing retreat participants shared that they feel more comfortable asking students to write robust explanations to questions, even in math and science classes, because as teacher-writers they understand the power of storytelling and writing for organizing their thinking, explaining what they know, and finding connections across daily lessons and units.

Kaleidoscope’s mission, to provide a public space for teachers to share their knowledge of teaching and the complexities of the profession, speaks to our shared commitment to using the power of storytelling to influence public understanding of education from inside classrooms. But thanks to our experiences of writing shoulder-to-shoulder with teachers during the writing retreat, we now understand this work cannot happen without community; teachers need each other to provide the context in which we learn about ourselves and discover ways

to communicate that knowledge to the world in our stories.

This is where you come in! If you've ever thought to yourself, "Someone needs to hear about this!", we encourage you to write *with* a colleague or consider initiating a writing retreat like the one we have described here. Regardless of the direction you take, we look forward to hearing how you use writing to discover more about yourself, improve your teaching practice, and build a community of teacher-writers. Please contact us at kaleidoscope@knowlesteachers.org!