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VEXATION

I've been a science methods instructor for almost two decades now. I'm confident that my course is meaningful to teachers and significant in their growth (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). I'm comfortable that the fifth-year, initial certification program for which my course functions as a capstone is about as effective as you could hope for, in the midst of the realities of American schools, in helping new teachers start well. I'm vexed, though, by what happens next. Rather than becoming change agents for teaching science with the pedagogies they've learned, my students seem to lose their way and become part of the status quo.

My students leave my university and go into tough teaching assignments, as almost any American teacher does. The face draining demands of piles of paperwork required by the realities of today's increased accountability levels in schools. They are challenged significantly by the double demand of inclusion of special needs learners and the rising number of English Language Learners. Successful performance on high-stakes tests is almost a daily mantra they must march to. And, in the midst of all of this, they work to stay true to their values of teaching science in an engaging, meaningful way to their students.

They lack support. My university has no mentoring program for its graduates. Most secondary schools in my area have no formal mentoring program and any informal mentoring they do offer is sketchy at best. My students end up spread out across many different school systems and typically lose track of one another. Their colleagues become the teachers in the building in which they work, most of whom teach by traditional methods at odds with the training my students have received.

Now, when I see most of them two or three years after I've taught them in their capstone methods course, there's an awkward silence. They're not quick to report the success of inquiry or conceptual change (Meadows, 2007; Suping, 2003) teaching with their students. Instead, their silence speaks clearly, "It didn't work." If I feel brave enough to ask specifically how they're teaching, they almost always report use of traditional lecture and book work. And, they usually explain, "It was just too hard to go against what all the other teachers in my building are doing."

A complicating factor is my state's tenure system for teachers. New teachers can be dismissed without cause until they are offered a contract following three years of teaching within the same school system. This system rewards teachers who avoid controversy and fit in well with their school's culture. To keep their jobs, my new teachers almost always feel significant pressure to conform to the status quo for teaching in their schools even if it means abandoning the research- and standards-based practices they learned in my course.

VENTURE

I'm thinking that launching a network is the next logical phase of my career and the missing, final step in new teacher development. New teachers need support as they situate their practice, and my teachers need strong social support if they're going to implement innovative pedagogies in schools where they may be the only teacher doing so. A network may not sustain every single graduate's holding on to the beliefs foundational to their initial training, but my guess is that I'll see a significant jump in the number of teachers who continue with standards-based practices.

I want to deploy Web 2.0 strategies as part of the network (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005). I've actually already taken a first step in this direction starting Twitter updates about teaching by inquiry. (You can follow me at LeeOnInquiry.) I envision those tweets both as regular encouragement to teachers who are trying to implement inquiry and short bursts of technical know-how. I also hope that as more of my graduates sign on to Twitter to get updates that the technology will provide them access to each other and that they'll begin using it as part of their social support.

I want to begin having occasional face-to-face support sessions that activate the network and bring them together. My vision of those sessions is to have one or two each summer, one each fall during our state science conference, and one each spring. These sessions would provide teachers with valuable professional development as a carrot to get them to attend, but would also give them plenty of time to talk with one another, deepen their connections, and increase the support of each other. Drawing them together into a common place throughout the year will combat the isolation they face as the only reformer in their respective schools.

I want to support leadership development from within the network. I know of several recent graduates that I could encourage to take a leadership role in building and maintaining a healthy network. I also know that I can't and shouldn't provide all of the leadership on my own. In Tipping Point style (Gladwell, 2002), I recognize that I am a maven for the network. I'm looking for connectors to bring the network together and salesmen to eventually expand the network and its influence.

Beyond those ideas, I look forward to the prospect of gathering insight from the Crossroads community for how better to deploy the network. I'm curious to know if similar networks are functioning elsewhere. I wonder what aspects of successful networking am I missing. I have a tendency to take a "Ready, Fire, Aim" approach to reform, and gaining other's perspectives will be a valuable way to help me slow down and be more thoughtful about this reform.

These efforts would lead naturally to a pilot study, and I look forward to feedback specifically about that as one facet of my venture. I work in a university that has a rich heritage of and strong infrastructure for external funding. I know that funding will speed the development of the network. I'm not sure, though, about how to structure such a study or who to target for funding.

I'm also absolutely intrigued by the social capital theme of this year's conference, especially since I've been vexed about the need for a network for at least two years now. I honestly know very little about social capital, but if I know that the Crossroads experience will be a good step forward in my understanding of social capital and how to apply it in my venture. I would think the connections are obvious. Trust, information flow, and sustaining the collective good are all essential features of a healthy network. Perhaps an understanding of social capital is my best next step in the work that I do to activate the network.