

Use Your Story: Teacher Learning Through Storytelling

It's Valentine's Day in Kirstin's second year of teaching, and her introductory science students are refusing to work in teacher-assigned groups. She's already met with a pair of vocal objectors in the hallway, both of them pointing as they screech that they respect class rules but won't work with her, and now there are multiple students in each group with arms crossed or heads down. The last straw: a white student has touched a black student's hair without asking and does not understand why the owner of the hair is aggressively angry.

When Kirstin's tears start, there is no stopping them, and she finds herself scrubbing at her eyes in horror in front of 30 suddenly silent and attentive teenagers.

"Is...is everything all right at home, ma'am?" asks one of the hallway students. Meanwhile, the violated young man with the Afro silently comes forward to put an arm sideways over Kirstin's shoulders. Later, he'll tell his guidance counselor that he'd never thought a teacher could get so emotional about her job.

Teachers collect stories like this, particularly in our first few years in the classroom. But what do we do with them?

As we stepped into the role of **Kaleidoscope's** first editors-in-chief, we realized that we both see storytelling as a powerful tool for improving education in three ways. First, the portrayal in popular media of teachers and their place in society has shaped how teachers are viewed and valued. By sharing the

knowledge that our authors generate in their schools, we hope to add vibrant, thoughtful voices to the rising movement challenging our nation's dominant narratives of teacher-shaming and teacher-proofing. We've published 19 articles by 33 writers, and each is a window into the power of reflective practice in education. Our authors tell stories of **revamping their curricula** to create more student-centered environments, constructing **communities on social media** to share ideas and pose questions, and reflecting on **trust and collaborative relationships with their colleagues** to better support student success—and that's just in our **latest issue**.

Second, teachers can learn a lot about ourselves from the stories and reflections of other educators. In their last years as Teaching Fellows, the 2010 and 2011 cohorts all read **a Kaleidoscope article** by Senior Fellow **Carmen Davis** in which she describes her gut-wrenching realization that, although she saw all students as learners and valued them intellectually, she had a much less positive view of her colleagues. Through our experiences with both authors and readers, we've come to learn that educators who have access to evocative storytelling like Carmen's use these stories as both mirror and lens; if an author's experiences are much like the readers, the reader experiences a feeling of camaraderie with the author, perhaps inspiring them to recreate a lesson or collect similar data in their classroom. Conversely, a reader could be in a completely different position from Carmen's, but still be prompted to wonder what deeply-held but unarticulated beliefs might be at play in their own professional life.

Teachers who explore in these ways are able to make changes in their instructional practices, curriculum, or relationships with colleagues. We've seen teachers dramatically improve the quality of education for students in their own classrooms and beyond as a result.

We've found storytelling to be an exciting tool for improving education in a third, deeply important way, one we believe is critical for improving education. The act of storytelling, particularly in writing, allows teachers to understand their experiences and examine their beliefs in surprisingly powerful ways. After her tearful Valentine's Day, Kirstin became far less likely to assign groups in her introductory courses. Years later, as she was writing on her experiences with developing her classroom's culture, she found herself in the middle of a startling revelation: the very same students who fussed in the hallway or sat with arms

folded and eyes averted told her in student surveys that they *liked* being assigned to teacher-selected groups. Kirstin realized that the physical behaviors she had previously interpreted as signs of anger and frustration might be signs of social anxiety instead. When she began to explicitly speak with students about the anxiety many people feel in new groups, she found students were far less resistant to—and more successful at—tasks with assigned partners.

We hear again and again from our authors that the process of writing for an audience clarified their thinking or shifted their perspectives. For some, the simple idea that their work would have merit to others has given our writers confidence to probe their assumptions more rigorously and reach new understandings. For others, feedback from early readers has deepened authors' awareness of the underlying systems of power and influence that impact relationships in schools. Still others describe how a single observation from a thinking partner early in the writing process transformed the next steps an author took in the classroom or faculty lounge.

In Kirstin's case, it was her writing group, a KSTF pilot program focused on **practitioner inquiry**, that encouraged her to critically review her classroom experiences. One of our challenges at *Kaleidoscope* is giving our authors similar access to thinking partners, even if there's limited support available in their current professional contexts. We've recently moved to a coaching model for helping authors early in the writing process, and we're running a digital writing group this year that we think will scale to provide scaffolding and feedback to any interested KSTF community members and their coauthors. These efforts grew from our staff's goal of lowering barriers to writing and, in doing so, further encouraging teachers to tell their stories in ways that both create and disseminate knowledge.

Kaleidoscope provides all of us with front-row seats to one of the most transformative events in education: teachers who use their stories as springboards for their own and others' learning. We encourage everyone to seek out narratives about teaching, both in **our journal** and elsewhere, and see what they learn about teachers and teaching.

Better yet, teachers, start writing.