# NSDC 2005 Summer Conference for School-Based Staff Developers

*Developing and Sustaining Relationships Through Dialogue: Perspectives from the Field*

Christopher Dignam, Marylou Dantonio, and Marilyn Wells, *Presenters*

**NSDC 2005 Summer Conference for School-Based Staff Developers**

G05: ***Developing and Sustaining Relationships Through Dialogue: Perspectives from the Field***

Strand: *Strengthening the impact of leadership through effective meetings and other results skills*


## Presented by:
Mr. Christopher Dignam, Teacher, Chicago Public Schools
Dr. Marylou Dantonio, Associate Dean, Ed.D. Programs, Walden University
Dr. Marilyn Wells, Senior Program Specialist, Laureate Education, Inc.



## Abstract
This session begins by questioning assumptions through problem-based learning scenarios. We will focus on skills that allow teacher leaders to develop close, trusting, and authentic relationships with colleagues through dialogue. We will explore how teacher dialogue creates an understanding that didn't exist before, and how the comments and questions of each teacher contribute to this understanding. The session concludes with practice and reflection of the dialogue skills.


**Objectives**

- Participants will be able to verbalize the significance of dialogue in a teacher leader role.
- Participants will learn, practice, and understand the application of inquiry in a relationship.
- Participants will demonstrate (through reflection) the strengths and areas to improve in their own dialogue skills.

**Presenter Bio(s)**
**Teacher Leader:**
**Christopher Dignam** has a B.S. in Biological Sciences from Northeastern Illinois University, an M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction from Olivet Nazarene University, and an M.A. in School Leadership Administration from Concordia University. He has been teaching high school biology in Chicago for eight years. In addition, he teaches physics and chemistry at DeVry University and is an adjunct professor for Olivet Nazarene University's graduate program for students earning a degree in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. He is currently enrolled in Walden University's Ed.D. program in Teacher Leadership.

**Panel Members:**
**Marylou Dantonio, Ed.D.** is Associate Dean, School of Education, Ed.D. Programs for Walden Unversity. She has been involved in the field of teacher development and leadership for 27 years, designing and implementing programs in teacher instructional leadership for several universities throughout the United States. Her published work in collegial coaching and questioning has been used extensively by educators. She has consulted with school districts and professional organizations to bring about more egalitarian and collaborative structures for initiatives in teacher leadership.

**Marilyn Wells, Ed.D**. has been involved in the field of education for 34 years. Her teaching experiences ranges from Infant Stimulation/Homebound/Preschool to Elementary and Secondary Special Education Programs to the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels in higher education. She is currently the program developer and course instructor for the Ed.D. at Walden University.

***Developing and Sustaining Relationships Through Dialogue: Perspectives from the Field***

**Tuesday, July 19, 2005**

**7:30 – 10:30 a.m.**

**Agenda**

**Welcome and Introductions:** Marilyn Wells

**Overview of Teacher Leadership :** Marylou Dantonio

**Imaging Activity:** Christopher Dignam

**Playing with Professional Development:** Christopher Dignam, Marylou Dantonio, and Marilyn Wells

**Critical Axioms of Teacher Leadership:** Marilyn Wells

**Discussions on School-Based Professional Devlopment:** Christopher Dignam, Marylou Dantonio, and Marilyn Wells and participants

**Closing:** Christopher Dignam, Marylou Dantonio, and Marilyn Wells and participants

**The Missing Piece: Teacher Leadership**

*Presented at the National Staff Development Council Conference*
*Chicago, Illinois, July 2005*

The history of American education is a tale of reform attempts that wax and wane in the elusive quest for schools of excellence. Historically, teachers have been at the center of criticism in schooling and learning reform. In the most recent incarnation of reform, schools—specifically, teachers—have been challenged to simultaneously pursue the goals of quality, equity, accountability, and choice through the mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Concomitantly, schools of education have continually been criticized for the lack of rigor and effectiveness in the preparation of educators. It has been teachers who have continually been blamed for poor student achievement and the inertia in meeting learning standards in our nation's schools.

Our nation's school critics' and policy and decision makers persistently have laid blame on teachers for poor student performance and lack of excellence in our schools. In doing so, they have ignored the potentiality of teachers being the answer to quality schools and dismissed the influence that teachers could have as partners in leadership needed to effect excellence in learning and school reform. In response to laying the blame for poor student performance on teachers, the teacher leadership movement is awakening a compelling and fundamental human axiom: the empowerment of stakeholders, the building and honoring of personal and professional relationships, and personal ownership of issues and situations is a powerful agent in generating solutions to resolve challenges. The notion behind teacher leadership is that educators know, at the end of the day, that education is about teachers, students, and learning. If we truly want to change schools and achieve excellence, it is teachers who are in a position to inspire students and shepherd schools toward the achievement of excellence. Teacher leadership has emerged as an important trend in recent years in response to changes in the context of American life and public schooling.

Teacher leadership has been known to threaten the hierarchical-embedded understanding of leadership inherent in American schooling. Teacher leadership, while becoming most worthy in improving student achievement and contributing to raising standards or education quality remains suspect and anarchical in traditional thinking, yet contemporary American schools. Even if teachers were empowered by school districts to engage in collaborative leadership with other educator leaders to make "tactical" education decisions at the classroom, school, and community levels, traditional teacher preparation programs have not prepared them for the frontline leadership and tactical decision making necessary to breech the gulf between student learning needs and institutional achievement demands. However, if American schools are to meet the demands of higher achievement for an ever-diverse population of learners, teachers as leaders must become eminent as a means of restructuring school leadership.

Teacher leaders accomplish their work in a number of informal and formal roles such as instructional team leaders, curriculum coordinators, teacher mentors, learning coaches, and classroom researchers. They are most successful in approaching learning and curricular problems through informal leadership processes. Successful teacher leaders embrace the following professional development processes: forming critical friend relationships to share concerns and understand the contextual demands of their learners; participating in collegial coaching to better understand the subtleties of the teaching/learning processes and enhance instructional performance; forming study groups to become more knowledgeable about contemporary issues and school-based situations needing focused attention; participating in learning communities of practice to network with colleagues, other educational leaders, and community members to effect sound school decision making; and conducting action research to better understand the contextual learning problems of students they teach everyday. Worthy of investigation, teachers leading in collaboration with more traditional school leaders may well provide the necessary agency for school reform and increased quality in student learning.

At a time when preparation programs for teachers and school administrators are being criticized as ineffective and seriously flawed in quality, Walden University has initiated an innovative approach for improving leadership in education through the development of a doctoral program in Teacher Leadership. The Walden teacher leadership program is specifically designed for teachers and focuses on the leadership roles teachers play in the classroom, school, and community. Unlike doctoral programs that are designed to lead educators out of the classroom into positions as principals, superintendents, other administrative roles, or into university teaching, this degree is intended for educators whose aspirations are to perfect the art and science of teaching and use their talents where they matter most—to improve learning among students in the classroom and to impact conditions for learning at the school, district, and state levels.

Who are teacher leaders? Teacher leaders are constructivists. They take a **constructivist approach to teaching and learning**, demonstrating reflective **practice processes in their thinking about teaching and learning,** and acting responsibly as a systems **thinker** who assumes an **inquiry stance** within a **community of practice** for the purpose of improving schooling practices of educators. The following description of these five critical qualities shows how a teacher leader developed in this mold meets the unique challenges of public education today.

*The teacher leader is a constructivist*. Constructivist educators believe that students combine their prior and current experiences with new information to actually build their own understanding. Students are not empty vessels into which the teacher pours the relevant curriculum information. Constructivists see students as participating actively in their own learning. The constructivist teacher engages the student in connecting his or her prior learning with new information to create meaningful new knowledge.

*The teacher leader is the consummate reflective practitioner*. A reflective practitioner is a professional who engages in:

- Performing a complex job as he/she thinks deeply about his/her experiences
- Applying learning and teaching theories to his/her instructional practice
- Developing contextual, effective instructional theoretical perspectives about teaching and learning from practice as they learn through their work with students
- Adapting future behavior based on those reflections.

In the classroom, teachers routinely improvise in response to student reaction to instruction. Such improvisation arises from the teacher's tacit knowledge about teaching and learning—knowledge so well learned that the teacher applies it without specific thought. One might refer to this as "thinking on your feet." However, the true reflective practitioner pushes beyond tacit improvisation to specific, deep analysis of his/her instructional decisions and actions which brings the teacher to understand alternative ways in which he/she can construct his/her practice to achieve desired outcomes for the diversity of learners in the classroom.

*Teacher leaders are systems thinkers who consider how their teaching affects and is affected by others in the school and school district*. Systems thinking is characterized by a shift in mindset from seeing reality as linear cause and effect chains to seeing interrelationships; from seeing reality as a series of "snapshots" to understanding the complex cause-and-effect relationships among actions within the school organization. The teacher leader as systems thinker sees the big picture as well as the classroom picture, and can speak effectively to fellow teachers, administrators, and parents alike about the relationship between the two.

*The teacher leader assumes an inquiry stance*. Traditionally, university researchers have conducted educational research. The results of such research were usually intended for academic audiences and rarely had a direct impact on the improvement of instruction at the classroom level. Over the last twenty years, as the concept of the reflective practitioner took root in education, a particular brand of research developed which places the teacher at the center of the research process. *Classroom research, classroom inquiry*, or *action research* is an intentional activity in which teachers ask specific questions about classroom practice and then collect and analyze data in an effort to answer the question and improve classroom practice which will influence student learning and achievement. It focuses educators on the questions that need to be asked and that influence the conditions of learning and the effects of experimenting with content delivery through instructional technique and assessment strategies.

As a result of the action research or instructional inquiry, the teacher can make specific data-based decisions about how to adjust his/her practice to effect quality in student learning. Classroom-based inquiry becomes the foundation for sharing findings within a context of a community of teacher-researchers who, in turn, can reflect about their classroom practice with other teachers to design interventions to more clearly define competent instructional practices, meeting more prudently the learning needs of students.

*Teacher leaders perfect their practice within communities of practice.* Educators sharing ideas and classroom research activities facilitate communities of practice. In communities of practice, educators interact regularly to support each other and share ideas in the pursuit of improvement within the field of interest. Communities of practice have existed for millennia through many types of associations, craft guilds, unions, clubs, and societies as well as informal gatherings of people who share common interests. Traditionally, however, teaching has been a solitary and very individual activity. However, the idea of teacher colleagues within the same school meeting regularly to critique each other's teaching and design and conduct classroom inquiry was uncommon. Such communities of practice are a relatively recent phenomenon arising out of the frontline crunch in which classroom teachers find themselves—situations in which they attempt to satisfy the demand for quality, equity, and accountability within increasingly diverse classrooms.

While efforts to include teachers in decision-making roles that influence classroom practice and improve student learning holds promise for school renewal and reform, teacher leadership has not been taken seriously by critics nor have teachers been legitimized as leadership agents charged with the responsibility of reforming schooling practices in America. Teacher leadership is not a "silver bullet." However, if American society is to succeed in efforts to promote quality schooling and prevail in reforming schools of excellence for all children, then we must, as a culture, change our ubiquitous, negative thinking that teachers are the problem. Instead, teacher leadership, working in concert with other educational and community leaders, must find its authentic place as a member of the community of leaders in school reform. School administrators, policy makers, and the public must realize that the grand ideas embodied in laws and policies require the frontline leadership of teachers in the continual pursuit of excellence. Empowerment of all stakeholders, valuing the contributions of all who have ownership over teaching and learning, and embracing, with commitment, the notion that teachers have a meaningful role to play in the leadership of our schools must prevail in our thinking if we are serious about quality education for all learners.

## Imaging Activity

This activity will provide you with an understanding of the role of teaching and leading from the perspective of performance. It is an activity that you can use with teachers at your school to help teachers understand the qualities of teaching that make our craft highly valuable and offer teachers a different perspective to think about the work they do with students and others in the school.

### (Visualizing discussion) **Who Teachers Are**

1. Name some people you admire in a performing arts field (e.g., actors, musicians, Olympic athletes, dancers, painters, etc.)

2. What do you admire about your performing artists?

3. In what ways are teachers like performing artists?

4. End with a statement that teachers are performing artists and need to address professional development as performing artists.

### (Actualizing discussion) **How We Learn**

Hold a discussion around the following questions and document responses

1. Keeping in mind what we said about performing artists, how do they study their craft?

2. If teachers are also performing artists, how do we need to approach the study of the craft of teaching to better fit the performing artist model?

3. What conditions are necessary for teachers to take an active role in assisting teacher growth, development, and leadership qualities?

**Critical Axioms of Teacher Leadership**
(Taken from Walden University's Ed.D. Guidebook)

The Teacher Leadership aims to move teachers from positions of advocacy for school reform to the frontline of building organizational capacity for school reform, and is built on the following critical axioms:

- Teachers possess unique and diverse perspectives on learning, teaching, and leading that are worthy of respect.

- Educators must continuously study the art and science of learning and teaching, analyzing their personal classroom instructional performances, student learning outcomes, curriculum, emergent leadership in school renewal, and advocacy of powerful learning opportunities for students and educators.

- The focus of authentic leadership is constructivist, relational, and reciprocal. It is neither hierarchical nor role bound.

- Teachers must be empowered and strive to assist others in finding their voice in the conversations of school renewal, education change processes, and influencing the context and cultures of K–12 schooling.

- Teacher leaders are curricular and instructional leaders of classroom and important members of the organizational learning community.

- Teacher leaders must develop an inquiry stance to investigate the culture of contemporary schooling to improve both their own classroom instruction and the schooling practices of all educators.

## Playing with Professional Development

You have cans of play dough on your tables. We are going to conduct two activities and then discuss the difference from the two perspectives of development that we create.

(First activity)

1. We would like you all to make the perfect ball with your play dough.
2. After making the balls, we then evaluate the balls on the following criteria: roundness, smoothness, size, bounce ability (We all make qualitative judgments, choosing both the best and worse as "making the grade"
3. We then ask: How did you feel about being chosen or not chosen? How did you feel about the process? What did you notice about yourselves making the balls?
4. We state that this is what traditional evaluation is about. It is done with the perspective of the evaluator and has very little to do with the creator or teacher. It is not professional development.
    - How did you feel about being chosen or not chosen?
    - How did you feel about the process?
    - What did you notice about yourselves while making the balls?

(New activity)

1. We would like you to make anything you want with the play dough.
2. We have them present their designs to each other
3. We ask them to destroy it and recreate whatever they want.
4. We ask: How did you feel about this approach? What did you notice about yourselves as you worked with the play dough?
5. We state this is what professional development of performing artists is about. We create, share, and redesign incorporating each other's ideas and talents. We are collaborative, collegial, and we lead through example attracting other educators to our vision.
    - How did you feel about this approach?
    - What did you notice about yourselves as you worked with the Play Dough?

## Closing

1. Based on what we've experience during this session, what insights have you had about teacher leadership?
2. What ideas will you be taking back to your districts about teacher development and leadership?
3. What do you believe we should do as a profession to enhance the concept of teacher leadership?
4. Thank you for your experience and quality participation in our session. Please feel free to email us and join our movement in sponsoring and advocating leadership as the missing piece in educational leadership.
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