

## Learning from the Past

by Rosanne Yost

The first time I saw the movie *Back to the Future*, I paid little attention to the meaning of the title and simply enjoyed the story line and the entertaining special effects. With the *Back to the Future* sequels, the idea lost some of its interest to me. Yet when something in one's own life seems to epitomize the message and meaning of a concept, it becomes important to investigate the reasons. Such has been the case in the way my teaching career has unfolded.

I must begin describing my change and growth as a rural elementary teacher at the point where "real" student contact actually began—as a student teacher. Other than my own experience in school as a small-town elementary and high school student, I had no involvement in classroom life until my student-teaching experience. However, my cooperating teacher, Mrs. S, was a seasoned veteran who had previously spent many years teaching in one-room country schools. I believe that fact made a difference in her philosophy about teaching and learning. Her notion of a real community learning together came from a different perspective than the one I had acquired in my undergraduate education.

My first day in the classroom was confusing, almost upsetting. My methods classes had handled each subject area as if it had a life of its own. Here, I could barely tell what subject the students were working on; it all seemed untidy. As I spent most of the week observing, I wondered how I could teach this way; most of all, I wondered if I even wanted to do it. It was not a comforting thought after all the time and money I had invested in earning a teaching degree.

But as I watched Mrs. S day after day, things began to make more sense. Looking back on the experience, I believe Mrs. S was what we would call a master teacher. Yes, her teaching was technically correct, but there was much more to it. Her planning skills were highly refined, and it was from her that I began to be able to picture the whole and not just the parts of teaching. Learning

to value the "big picture" has affected the rest of my teaching life.

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Another striking part of her approach was her interest in the students and the fact that she did not feel that she had really taught anything unless the students learned it. Such an attitude may seem unconventional, but since then I have heard many teachers say that they taught the lesson several times and the students just didn't learn. Then what was taught? It became our private joke.

Mrs. S was a mentor not only to me but to each of her students. In that classroom, along with strict discipline, she created the feeling that everyone could do it if we all worked together. I have always tried hard to make that lesson a part of my classroom atmosphere. Mrs. S and I never talked about working together or the fact that teachers were the best help for each other, but I did come to understand that concept from her example. At times in my career it almost got away from me, but I never forgot it.

After graduation, I found a position working as an aide in a sixth-grade classroom. The class met in a church basement with sixty-five students, two teachers, and me. We were an entity unto ourselves, not much different from a one-room schoolhouse. We had our own "building," we had our own playground (an empty lot), we brought our lunches, we never saw the other district teachers, and we received one visit from the

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administration. The students brought things of interest to do in free time or at recess, and our time was spent together. Our “library” consisted of all the books the teachers owned. As the year progressed, our library grew because students brought books, parents brought books, and we made every rummage sale in town to buy books. Our library, which became important and personal to all of us, was always in use.

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The two teachers, G and R, had many years of teaching experience, but the church-basement experience was new to them also. From the outset this challenge was a team effort. Both these ladies saw me as team member. From the beginning I was involved in the real life of the classroom. We decided how to set up the room—one large room. The kitchen was used as a small-group area. I remember well the long, narrow kitchen and the waist-high worktable that took up the center of the room. We would haul folding chairs in there and laugh as the kids somehow “hung” on the table to do their work.

We worked out a schedule—not without difficulty—despite all the limitations of our situation. As problems arose we worked together to solve them. How were we to overcome the noise of the huge heater? How were we to conduct separate classes in one big area? How would we manage the noontime period? Where could we get a blackboard? How were we to change the atmosphere of this dark place? I remember R once saying that since we were in a church, maybe the best thing that we could do was pray!

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Even though we were physically isolated from the rest of the school district, we were not isolated from teaching and learning together. I may have had the title and pay of an aide, but I was allowed and encouraged to work as a team

member. The word mentor, guide, or counselor was never used, but the definition of the word was put to use. We sat down after school each day and discussed what had happened. We talked about how the lessons went and how an individual student might need some extra attention. My personal experiences as a student in public school had always been positive, as was my student-teaching experience, but I had never looked at or considered how teachers really did things. That year taught me much, but most of all it gave me the experience of a lifetime. In that year of struggle, I came to understand the life of a real educator.

In today’s research literature you will find the term “community of learners” often discussed. We were the definition of that term in practice. We talked, we planned, we shared, we coached and helped each other, we evaluated our conditions and our work, and we looked for new and better ways to teach. We were always bringing things from home that would aid us in some way. We were always looking for better examples, more complete explanations, and a different look at something commonplace in order to bring more meaning to the students.

Today, such teaching practices have been given names and studied to understand why they work. At the time, they were simply the best ways to make three teachers effective in their classroom. The most comforting aspect of the year was knowing that none of us had to do it alone. No one had to have all the answers. Working together, we gave our students and ourselves a much better chance to succeed.

My second year in the district found me at the regular school site teaching sixth grade with thirty-two students in a classroom. How different this experience was for me! The schedule said that I had forty-four minutes for reading, forty-four minutes for social studies, and twenty-eight minutes for spelling. The students could use the restroom only at assigned times, and the library was to be used only during the period designated on the schedule unless special arrangements were made. Everyone had extra duties and there was no varying from the assignments. My room should be neat and the students should be quiet. There were four new teachers and eight experienced teachers in the building. G, one of the teachers from the church basement, was also there.

The atmosphere was very different from what G and I had experienced the previous year. The

divided, compartmentalized attitude forced me to alter what I wanted to do. But I did not forget the lessons I had learned the year before. Likewise, I do not think it changed how G felt about education or what was best for the students and the teachers. It was simply much more difficult to teach the way we wanted to; the approach we had brought to education in the church basement was not feasible in this building.

I may have been at the school site, I may have had coffee in the lounge, I may have eaten in the lunchroom, but I was as isolated as if I were there alone. I was told how to get needed materials, how the schedule worked, how to pick up my paycheck, but very little else. Everyone said, "Just ask if you have any questions." The problem was that I needed answers, but before I could have the answers I needed someone to help me understand what questions to ask.

The other new teachers probably felt the same way, but we didn't talk about it, and I didn't want anyone to know that I didn't understand so many things. I did not want to appear unprepared or unskilled. And so, I learned. I learned mostly alone and, I believe, mostly by accident. I watched the people I identified as good teachers, but the things I really needed to know and understand were lost to me until my own personal experiences taught me. As I acquired more experience some questions, real questions, began to form. In my teaching I continually tried to find and define my own answers.

In time, I realized how important the year as an aide in an unusual situation had been for me. Over the years, as new teachers would come to the district, I tried to help them define their questions and look for possible solutions. But even with effort, the system did not allow for the needed professional contact. Each teacher was in a little world and ready to defend that world against anything from the outside. From time to time there were some good team efforts, but they were never sustained and led to no better understanding or better teaching and learning.

Once I had adjusted to working in a "normal" school, I was able to continue my career with a feeling of accomplishment. But a few years later, another radical change in my teaching situation produced another unsettling effect on me. The fifth and sixth grades of the school I had been teaching in were moved into a new addition at a K-4 school site. The rooms were beautiful, but the atmosphere was not. The tightly organized



staff almost seemed to regard the older kids and their teachers as intruders.

Although the fifth- and sixth-grade teachers did not talk much about it, the uncomfortable situation did cause us to become a rather tight group—not necessarily sharing planning strategies or trying to learn from each other, but always providing emotional support.

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The passage of time and our attempts to work together helped the situation, but I always had a lingering feeling that things could have been different. The experience had made me feel inadequate to help make a change.

A university-initiated program that included rural school districts gave me the opportunity to try. It did not occur to me that this would be the beginning of an educational adventure that would affect my school and my life. The program consisted of mentoring new teachers and working on a graduate degree at the university. As I

began working with my two new teachers and attending classes with others in the program, I started thinking of 1972 and my experience in the church basement. It was possible to address the realities of loneliness in teaching. As I participated in conversations and had time to listen I knew that real questions were being shared.

The mentoring program opened the door to new learning for me and for much of the staff. It taught us how to take charge of our own learning and growth and understand the value to ourselves and our students of promoting excellence in each other and in our school. We learned it was important to observe and discuss school life. It is important to be a supporter and to act as advocates for each other and appreciate the viewpoints of others. Good educators have long recognized the importance of learning communities and their

effects on teacher growth and development. So often what we know to be true is neglected in the busy everyday life of teaching. We quite often forget the significance of taking time to share and practice good teaching and the proven power of simply observing and helping each other.

Models of how to work, plan, learn, and play together need to be created and followed. With this type of practice and support, teachers in any learning community can become models for collaborative work and consistently demonstrate life-long learning for their students and community.

It is sometimes necessary to revisit the past and understand the worth of keeping best practices alive. Maybe we all need to be closer to going back to the future—back to the culture of the church basement where I learned how to teach and how to learn.