

Cindy O'Donnell-Allen

Pedagogical Recycling: How Colleagues Change Colleagues' Minds

Using the metaphor of recycling along a continuum, teacher-researcher Cindy O'Donnell-Allen describes how teachers adapt the ideas of their colleagues with varying degrees of change based on their different contexts.

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hen my family and I moved from the Southwest to Colorado six years ago so that I could take a job as a professor, our friends joked that we would be wearing socks with sandals by Christmas. We did go from self-basting in the summertime heat to shivering in sweatshirts on the Fourth of July. Yet the most striking difference we noticed was not the environment itself but the predominant cultural views about it. Coloradans are proud of their mountains and streams

and, if you stick around for long, the ethos is contagious. My children quickly developed a more profound respect for the earth that resulted in their tossing empty soda cans into the recycle bin rather than the garbage, and they continue to chastise visiting relatives who forget to do the same.

Surely this same worldview influenced my thinking as I sat in my university office

the summer after the move, refining the coding scheme for a longitudinal study of my teacher-research group. I wondered how to capture what was happening when teaching and research ideas resurfaced in our conversations multiple times over the group's three years together. How did these ideas manage to find their ways into members' classrooms and other professional contexts? And what form did they take when they did? I knew we were doing more than just repeating ourselves as

we changed one another's minds. Rather, we had become good stewards of conceptual and pedagogical resources we held in common. In other words, we were *recycling*.

Changing One's Professional Mind

In *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Donald A. Schön lends insight into how teachers change their minds by thinking both *on* their feet in the process of teaching and *off* their feet at the end of the day. He calls the first state of mind "reflection-in-action" and the second "reflection-on-action." In both instances, teachers use a reflective lens to resee the events occurring in their classrooms. These interpretations lead them to action by prompting changes intended to improve their teaching.

Such reflective processes are familiar to teacher-researchers whose methods make them systematic and intentional (Cochran-Smith and Lytle). Yet even as they highlight the impact of such methods, many teacher-researchers also recognize the influence of colleagues on their thinking. In *Teacher-Researchers at Work*, veteran teacher-researchers Marion S. MacLean and Marian M. Mohr heartily recommend teacher-research groups as invaluable sources of intellectual and moral support. In *Teaching Other People's Children: Literacy and Learning in a Bilingual Classroom*, Cynthia Ballenger details the intellectual traditions she has developed with her colleagues in the Brookline Teacher Research Seminar (BTRS). According to Courtney Cazden, Ballenger's choice to feature their voices as well as her own saves the book from becoming "just the latest in the genre of teacher autobiogra-

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phies . . . the story of one individual working in wondrous ways, but working largely alone” (viii).

In my three-year study of the Red River Writing Project Teacher Research Group (RRWPTRG), I likewise examined how group members thought collaboratively about questions arising from our teaching. I wanted to know in more detail how colleagues in this professional development context made lasting changes in one another's minds.

The Recycling Continuum

In determining how to trace these changes through the data, my mind seized on the concept of recycling. In its simplest sense, recycling is the process of regaining material rather than discarding it, but recycling occurs along a continuum in that one might recycle an object for identical, similar, or altogether different purposes. For instance, after drinking all the milk from a glass milk bottle, I have several recycling options. I could simply return the bottle to the milk box on my front porch, and the dairy would refill it with another quart of milk. Or I could use it in a similar, but not identical, fashion as a pitcher for another liquid, say, fresh-squeezed lemonade. To use it further still from its original purpose, I could refill the bottle with water and turn it into a vase for fresh flowers. Finally, I could place it in my recycle bin, where it would be taken to a center, crushed with other glass, and changed into a soda bottle, a pickle jar, or decorative tile.

In my teacher-research group, I discovered that the same range of recycling occurred when members shared concepts and methods for research and teaching. This is no news flash, of course. Teachers have long engaged in professional thievery. Indeed, the purpose of conferences, publications such as *English Journal*, and professional development in general is to share ideas. I often tell the preservice teachers with whom I work to “steal and adapt, steal and adapt,” and experienced teachers have learned to recycle teaching strategies both as an act of survival and in our elusive pursuit of what works best.

What is less obvious, however, is a detailed understanding of the second half of the advice I give students, the complex adaptive processes by which this recycling occurs. Perhaps only the naive believe that the best practices touted in journals and at conferences are akin to my simple reuse of the aforementioned milk bottle. That is to say, few and far between are those practices that will work in *exactly* the same manner in one classroom as they worked in another. In fact, in their reviews of best-practice articles in leading language arts journals, both Jonathan Bush and Mark Dressman have critiqued the implicit view that lasting pedagogical change and, by extension, professional development is a mere process of “find and replace.” Both authors argue for de-sanitized narratives with fuller descriptions of authors' teaching contexts so that readers can then determine how to adapt the featured teaching strategies so they will have a long shelf life in different classrooms.

In my analysis of RRWPTRG data, I saw repeated instances of members' adaptations of each other's theories and strategies for use in other contexts. While I initially coded these instances as “recycling,” I quickly saw that this umbrella term was insufficient for capturing the complexity of the processes at play. Rather, members took up their colleagues' concepts and strategies and recycled them along a continuum similar to the one described in my example of the milk bottle. Furthermore, the degree of adaptation related directly to the context to which the concept or strategy was being transferred. I refer to these differences as *exportation* and *transmutation* and think of them as occurring along a continuum, as shown in Figure 1.

Using the milk bottle as an example, exportation refers to the wholesale transfer of the object from one context to another similar context for identical or near-identical use. On the other end of the spectrum, transmutation refers to the adaptation of the object *across* contexts for increasingly varied uses. Both processes fall under the umbrella of recycling, and both preserve some essential element of the substance at hand (i.e., even the new

FIGURE 1. Exportation and Transmutation Continuum



tile is still made of glass), yet the final purpose and incarnation of that element vary according to the constraints of the new context.

Similarly, in the case of teaching and research strategies, changing colleagues' minds involves more than simply suggesting a new best practice or way of thinking. The most lasting forms of professional development occur when colleagues not only share teaching or research strategies but also develop an intimate understanding of one another's teaching contexts and a common-enough conceptual framework to support adaptation through the entire recycling continuum. In the following sections, I demonstrate one instance of how this process occurred for RRWPTRG members by tracing a strategy introduced in one of our meetings through its many uses and incarnations in contexts beyond the group.

Meeting Mandalas

Hannah, a member of the Red River Writing Project (RRWP), had attended a session on teacher-research groups at the 1995 National Writing Project conference and thought that RRWP might be interested in creating a teacher-research group.

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Shortly after Hannah presented her proposal to the RRWP Governing Board, seven RRWP teachers, including Hannah and myself, formed RRWPTRG for the purposes of learning more

about teacher research and supporting one another as we conducted our studies. By Year 2, three of our original members had left RRWPTRG for various reasons, and the group consisted of the four core members I focus on in this article. Crystal, an artist-in-residence, was interested in the relationship among visual art, writing, and intrapersonal reflection. Hannah, a teacher at a regional community college, was looking at the influence of reading dispositions on her nontraditional students' decisions to return to school. Roxanne was studying the social dynamics of a small group of "bad boys" (Gallas) in her multiage, project-based elementary classroom. I was interested in the workings of RRWPTRG.

In her work with students throughout our state, Crystal had sensed a symbiotic connection between art-making and vibrant student writing

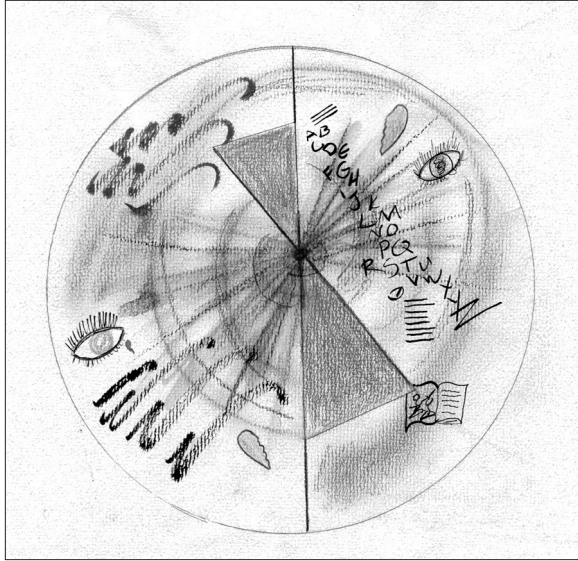
that she wanted to explore further through her teacher-research study. At an RRWPTRG meeting, she explained:

So when I do an art activity and [students are] doing a visual art that's not real realistic, but it's pretty abstract, you know, and then I bring in some kind of words with it or some poetry or whatever, what happens is the poetry or the writing then becomes more self-reflective. The kids' writing becomes more self-reflective and becomes more powerful. The images are better and the image is not mundane. And so to me, that's what I thought was curious is that I could give an assignment and do writing prompts and do brainstorming and all that, but then, when I would do marbling [an art activity] and do the same thing, they'd come up with these wild poems, and I thought, just thought that was interesting.

Because she had such success combining art and writing with her students, Crystal also wanted our teacher-research group to experience the process firsthand through mandala-making, an exercise she had been using for her own artistic development. Used in ancient cultures as tools for spiritual enlightenment, mandalas are circular figures filled with symbolic images. Crystal believed we could use them to enlighten ourselves regarding the progress we had made in our individual studies thus far.

So, one Sunday afternoon early in the group's second year, Crystal led us to the art studio in the back of her home. Warm light streamed onto the hardwood floor, and soft instrumental music played in the background. Over a large table, Crystal had scattered charcoal pencils, pastels, plastic templates of geometric shapes, watercolors, brushes, small bottles of water, and large empty coffee cans. Excited and a little nervous, I remember thinking, *This is a great space and all, but I'm no artist. Couldn't we just write and talk about it instead?*

But Crystal didn't give us a chance to say no. She tore thick sheets of art paper from a large pad, handed one to each of us, and told us to trace a circle onto the page using a coffee can for a template. We could use any of the materials we wanted to fill our mandalas with symbols meant to capture a sense of our teacher-research studies at that point in time. "What are your hunches? What are your questions?" she asked. Our mandalas would then serve as stimuli for reflective conversation. "Trust



Crystal's Mandala from the RRWPTRG Meeting

yourself and have fun. And don't worry about 'making art.' This is all about the process."

I killed time by riffing through the pastels and colored pencils for a few moments, but I finally picked up a plastic template and, for some unknown reason, began tracing circles of different sizes inside the outline of my mandala. At first, I stole a few glances at Hannah's and Roxanne's papers, but I kept working and eventually became more interested in what was emerging. I picked up a paintbrush and swished it in a bottle of water. I had four converging circles now, and somehow I knew that each should be outlined in a different shade. *Why four circles?* I remember wondering. Well, there were four of us in the group, and somehow we were connected. *Roxanne is more an orange than a yellow*, I thought, dipping my brush into the palette. At that point, I was off as worry gave way to the wondering and wandering that I have learned mark the creative process.

After several minutes had passed, group members were as reluctant to stop working as we had been to start, but Crystal drew the mandala-making to a close by explaining the next step of the exercise. Much like the leader of a creative writing workshop, she asked the artist to listen first as other group members "read" her mandala and talked about what they saw in the images. Afterward, the artist reflected on her own work. The exploratory discussion that followed wove together members'

observations and allowed us each to talk through our preliminary research findings, raise new questions, and get feedback on our research processes. At the end of the discussion, everyone agreed that the process had resulted in breakthroughs by helping us reflect on what we had accomplished, identify where we were, and project where we were headed in our individual studies.

Recycling through Exportation

A few months later, Crystal, Roxanne, and I reused our milk bottle, so to speak, by hauling our art paper, colored pencils, and watercolors across the country to the International Conference of Teacher Research (ICTR), where we duplicated the mandala exercise in a roundtable presentation. While we realized that mandala-making would be a pretty big risk among strangers, we had found the process to be so valuable that we decided to push the boundaries of the professional conference setting. Our goal was to create an on-the-spot teacher-research group for our participants by introducing them to a tool for collaborative reflection they might take back to their teacher-research groups.

Just as she had with RRWPTRG, Crystal led participants to reflect on their respective teacher-research studies through the mandala-making process. Despite some initial apprehension, participants were good sports in making their mandalas and eventually became just as immersed in the process as we had the first time. The reflective conversation that followed the exercise was surprisingly personal and substantive considering participants had first met only a few minutes before. Teacher-researcher guru Susan Lytle, who had participated in the session, remarked on the intimacy created by the exercise, and other participants thought aloud about ways they might use the exercise in other settings. The exercise had been so successful, even with a group of complete strangers, that Roxanne went on to use it in a similar fashion with graduate students in an action research class where she had been asked to serve as a guest speaker. Both instances demonstrate recycling by means of

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exportation in that RRWPTRG members reenacted a useful practice from an initial setting centered on professional development (i.e., a teacher-research group meeting) to similar contexts (i.e., the conference setting and the graduate classroom) for an identical purpose—to allow participants in the new professional development context to engage in a reflective process that we as teacher-researchers had found to be useful.

Recycling through Transmutation

Like all teacher-researchers, RRWPTRG members simultaneously inhabited nearer and dearer contexts that motivated our inquiries in the first place, namely our classrooms and our schools. While practices from our classrooms, such as freewriting and exploratory discussion, occupied a central space in RRWPTRG, could RRWPTRG practices also be recycled into our classrooms?

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Again, mandala-making proved to be such a practice, though one that would require substantial transmutation. After all, Crystal had developed the exercise to help RRWPTRG members reflect on our teacher-

research studies, and our students weren't generally teaching one another, much less collaborating to study the processes of doing so. Yet RRWPTRG members were so enamored with mandala-making, we were convinced the exercise could have a place in all of our classrooms, as varied as they might be.

I asked the eleventh graders in my AP Language and Composition class to develop mandalas and an accompanying text, which I called a visual found poem, that reflected their understanding of Frederick Douglass's development in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. (Instructions for the poem are on *EJ* on the Web. Visit <http://www.englishjournal.colostate.edu/extensionsmain.htm>.) This final project was part of a unit that focused more broadly on the oral tradition in African American literature, rhetorical analysis, and argumentation. Sensing that students were weary of tropes and schemes and all the exegesis that necessarily accompanies an AP course, I wanted to close the unit with an approach that would recapture the power and passion students had initially responded to in Douglass's work and might also capitalize on the visual-verbal con-

nections Crystal had seen students make when combining art-making with writing.

On the day I introduced the project, I brought in art supplies, large sheets of butcher paper, and circular objects of various sizes for tracing and asked students to move their desks together in groups of four to create a shared workspace. Naturally, students' first question was, "What's a mandala?" I described the mandala as a circular design symbolizing the universe, totality, or wholeness through concentric geometric forms and other images. I showed students several examples of traditional mandalas from Susanne F. Fincher's *Creating Mandalas: For Insight, Healing, and Self-Expression* and then explained that the "universe" with which we were concerned was that of Douglass's *The Narrative*. Through their mandalas and their visual found poems, students would attempt to capture the spirit of the entire book. Together, these products were to reflect a playful, but thoughtful, reconsideration of Douglass's central rhetorical purposes.

Remembering the trepidation I had felt in my initial attempt at mandala-making, I adapted a brainstorming exercise from Fincher to help students generate potential images to include on their mandalas. I asked them to draw two columns on a sheet of notebook paper and label the left column "Words" and the right "Associations." Next, they listed in the left column ten words that came to mind as they reflected on Douglass's purposes throughout the book. Beside each word, they were to list five possible associations in the right column. "Brainstorm, trust your brain, censor nothing," I instructed after they had listed ten words in the left column. I drew an example on the board (see fig. 2) and then timed them as they listed associations beside each word, allowing thirty seconds per word with a fifteen-second resting time between.

From this list of seventy or eighty words, students eliminated all of the obvious choices, thus

FIGURE 2. Generating Mandala Images

Word	Association
flight	bird, cloud, airplane, sky, breath, buoyant, wings

identifying the concepts they found most generative. I again told them to trust their brains to make connections among the short list of remaining

words, allowing the words to suggest possible starting points, images, and a unifying concept for their mandalas. After talking briefly with a partner about color choices and images that might communicate these concepts, students spent the remaining half hour or so of the block period drawing their mandalas. For homework, they were to finish their mandalas and create their visual found poems.

The next class period, I followed Fincher's suggestions for interpreting mandalas and asked students to move from the visual to the verbal by writing brief meditations about their mandalas on another sheet of paper. We would refer to these later in our reflective discussions. The first step was to survey the mandala and allow a title to come quickly to mind that captured this overall impression. Next, students listed key colors and images from the mandala and noted any associations or patterns of meaning among them. Finally, they looked back over this list and wrote a few sentences expressing the central theme of the mandala.

After students completed their meditations, they spread the mandalas out on desks around the room. They then browsed among them, selecting another student's mandala to which they were instinctively drawn. At this point, we began an extended exploratory discussion similar to that of RRWPTRG. One by one, each student described the mandala he or she had chosen. The viewer's observations were followed by the creator's reflection based on the meditation written earlier and then by a reading of the accompanying found poem. As they listened, students jotted down patterns and repeated images. In the free-flowing class discussion that followed, I compiled on the board a master list of patterns and images the students had noted among the mandalas and found poems. Finally, we synthesized our responses to their projects with their overall impressions of Douglass's work by connecting the master list to larger patterns within *The Narrative* itself.

This resulted in one of *those* discussions—the kind so intense the air seems to vibrate, the kind that makes you want to believe in angels and go on teaching. Toward the end, I asked students to consider how, if at all, these exercises had influenced their understanding of Douglass's work. The students observed that the project prompted them to draw broader conclusions about Douglass's por-

trayal of himself as a symbolic persona in the abolitionist movement.

Although the Frederick Douglass project provides another instance of recycling mandalas, this one falls squarely on the transmutation end of the continuum, for I substantially modified the original exercise suggested by Crystal. In a meeting later that summer, other RRWPTRG members reported doing the same. Hannah asked her community college students to create mandalas in response to short stories, and Roxanne not only used the exercise to help her fifth and sixth graders reflect on historical events but also shared it with her colleagues, who in turn created a “mission statement” mandala as an entire staff and displayed it in their elementary school. The contextual differences among our purposes, participants, and final products required adapting the original mandala exercise from our RRWPTRG meeting. The outcomes were uniformly positive but only because transmutation occurred in every case.

We used the mandalas as a visualization strategy to prompt participants' reflections on their interpretive processes, we asked them to articulate these reflections through writing and exploratory discussion, and we engaged the group in some kind of synthesis through which new meanings were constructed collaboratively.

Rethinking the Role of Best Practices in Professional Development

In my current position as a writing project director, I converse regularly with teachers and administrators about professional development, and the prevailing request is for inservice sessions in which foolproof best practices are shared. The reasoning goes that a set of best practices exists out there somewhere, and if we can just find it, teachers will improve, learners will thrive, and educational reform will occur.

Mandala-making itself could certainly fall into the best-practice category. Not only did it succeed in all the classrooms where RRWPTRG members recycled it but it also worked at a conference devoted explicitly to larger-scale educational reform. I believe these repeated successes had less to do with mandala-making itself and more to do with our confidence in Crystal's emergent research findings on visual-verbal connections and intrapersonal reflection. Paired with members' knowledge about subsequent contexts in

which mandalas would be used, these underlying principles allowed for optimal recycling along the entire continuum. Because the conference setting was sufficiently similar to our original RRPWTRG meeting, the exportation of mandala-making was suitable. But when we moved mandalas beyond the group, transmutation was required according to the constraints of each new context. Even when our procedures varied, however, the underlying elements of the exercise remained the same. We used the mandalas as a visualization strategy to prompt participants' reflections on their interpretive processes, we asked them to articulate these reflections through writing and exploratory discussion, and we engaged the group in some kind of synthesis through which new meanings were constructed collaboratively.

Did all of us grow professionally because of our exposure to mandalas? Yes, but not simply because mandalas "worked." We grew because Crystal's research informed us about *why* they worked, and these underlying principles convinced us that mandalas could help students and colleagues reach new insights as well. We grew because our RRPWTRG experiences equipped us to recycle, ask questions, and support one another in finding provisional answers over time. Furthermore, participation in the group gave us the confidence and the charge to reach beyond the group to change the minds of more distant colleagues through conference participation and publication. Though RRPWTRG disbanded when members moved away, our recycling has continued. Through email, we've learned that we still draw on one another's research findings and teaching strategies in our work with students and colleagues. Our view of the large, amorphous concept called *educational reform* is now clearer and more immediate, almost as if someone has twisted the lens of a camera and we now see ourselves as part of the picture.

In "*Is This English?*" *Race, Language, and Culture in the Classroom*, Bob Fecho also challenges the notion that best practices are the secret to professional development: "In my scheme of thinking, there can be no best practice, because there is no reaching such a point. . . . Our practice is in constant flux. . . . Therefore, we need a teaching structure on which we can depend, yet still permit improvisation,

serendipity, and sway" (4). I have found that my teaching structure is strongest when bolstered by a professional development structure that fosters the kind of flexible thinking Fecho describes. In our three years together, this is exactly what RRPWTRG members offered one another: a shared conceptual base that allowed us to evaluate the usefulness of proposed ideas for our respective teaching structures and to determine the degree of adaptation necessary for successful recycling in other contexts.

RRPWTRG's example suggests that the key to lasting changes in mind is sustained participation in professional development spaces where colleagues support one another as they mindfully recycle practices and ideas along the full continuum. The objective of recycling is not only to reduce waste but to extend use. As Fecho points out, "there is no last step, only a next step. And those steps differ for us all" (5).

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