



MAINE CTE *PROMISING PRACTICES* MINI CASE STUDY
Tri-County Technical Center
Dexter, ME
Director: Nick Vafiades

PROMISING PRACTICE: Schoolwide Reading and Writing Journaling Project

During the 2007–08 school year, the Tri-County Technical Center made integration of reading and writing into program area instruction a focus.¹ Early in the year, Sarah MacGown was hired to be the academic coordinator, a new position at the technical center. MacGown’s goals during Year 1 were to integrate literacy development into the CTE programs and to develop relationships with the sending high schools that would lead to figuring out how the technical center might work more closely with them and create more opportunities for collaboration and credit assignment.

Vafiades and MacGown realized that to be successful, literacy improvement and academic integration needed to be a schoolwide initiative and that they needed to provide support and clear expectations for CTE staff. They decided to launch a schoolwide journaling project. The objective was for students to read and write more in their chosen skills area and to improve their reading and writing skills.

Vafiades and MacGown began by introducing the expectation that students in all CTE programs would read an article from a trade journal, magazine, or newspaper and reflect on that article by responding in writing to four prompts: What was the main point of the article? If you could ask the author one question, what would it be and why? What new thing did you learn? How does this article connect with what you are doing in class? This journaling activity was supposed to happen weekly; instructors were asked to respond to student responses. Vafiades and MacGown modeled the activity in staff meetings and had the staff reflect on it verbally. According to MacGown, “The key question is number four, connect to the class.”

As director, Vafiades knew that just expecting staff to do this and modeling the expectation was not enough. He connected the expectation to staff review and evaluations “and I looked at the students’ journals and we had intensive conferences about this. I made it clear that we’re not having you do specific prompts and read specific articles. Every student was provided with a composition book where the responses to the prompts were written down.”

At first there was some resistance — instructors wondered if the goal was to “make English teachers out of machinists and law enforcement people.” Eventually most staff engaged students in the journaling activity; others assigned it but did not really “buy in.” Vafiades and MacGown were concerned about this because “if the instructors don’t buy in the kids won’t be invested at all.” So Vafiades and MacGown kept bringing it back at staff meetings, asking instructors to discuss how it was going, what they had tried. MacGown worked individually with instructors to suggest how they could make the activity more relevant, more engaging. According to Vafiades, “It ended up being a wide variety of selections. Some staff left it open — others selected the passage and read the passage in class and then had students respond and then they discussed it...[in computer repair] they did it all electronically.”

Vafiades also made certain that instructors had the resources they needed. “We provide trade journals in each area. I tell them you can have whatever you need to make it happen. Plus we have a few magazines and 5-6 newspapers there in the common area. The resources are at hand.”

Staff meetings also focused on the use of literacy strategies. Again, Vafiades and MacGown say they tried to model what they expected staff to do and made time to talk about it. MacGown attended the CTE

¹ Information in this write-up comes from an interview by phone on June 5, 2008 with Nick Vafiades, center director, and Sarah MacGown and subsequent emails.

Leadership for Literacy session sponsored by MACTE, a Jim Burke workshop, and other literacy professional development and presented the strategies she learned at staff meetings. She also worked individually with instructors on selecting and using appropriate literacy support strategies to help students learn content. For example, she suggested that the graphics instructor try using a Venn diagram to have students compare and contrast two graphics programs. Students were able to produce detailed reasons why they preferred one to the other and had the benefit of recognizing that there were pros and cons to each.

Approximately one third of the staff participated in literacy professional development as well, which had the effect of promoting buy in and softening resistance. The computer repair instructor had participated in the CTE Literacy Mentor Training two years ago and three other instructors participated in some of the literacy workshops offered through MACTE in 2007 and 2008.

During the 2007–08 school year, MacGown made some progress on developing relationships with the five sending schools, establishing contacts with each one. According to Vafiades, “We are also working with the Virtual High School (VHS). We got a membership this year and Sarah got training to be a facilitator. The goal for this is credit recovery and drop out prevention. This way students can schedule through VHS to make up for courses including AP English so they are not limited as to who they can send. Sarah will be offering a basic essay course.”

What difference is it making?

Vafiades said, “I think many of our kids don’t read, they just don’t do it, unbelievable. In some of the composition books [from students in the programs] where it was more effective you could see some change, you could notice it across from the beginning of the year.”

But even more telling is what occurred during the last two staff meetings of the 2007–2008 school year when staff discussed the journaling activity and the literacy focus and made decisions about how they wanted to continue to support literacy development next year. Vafiades said, “At the last staff meeting [in May], I put the journaling project on the table. We had a good conversation about how to scaffold literacy. Several staff did presentations as well.” Vafiades says he was open to not continuing the journaling activity across all programs but he wanted the staff to agree on what all of them *would* do, if not that, to support students to increase their reading and writing relative to program content. “My goal is that we will try to nail it down to do one schoolwide practice for next year.”

At the last staff meeting of the year in June, the staff made a number of decisions about the journaling project and MacGown’s role. According to an email from MacGown:

1. We are going to continue the journals. A number of teachers spoke up in favor of them and actually said they would continue them even if the building as a whole decided against them.
2. I will be doing more intensive one-on-one literacy supports. My role will become much more active in this area.
3. Individual teachers will be responsible for bringing lesson plans to the staff meetings to present their uses of literacy in the classroom (kind of a show-and-tell, on a professional level).

According to MacGown: “With all three aspects combined, we are looking at the ‘Literacy Puzzle’ and figuring out where the pieces fit. Sounds complicated, I know, but the staff as a whole seemed eager for it, so we will give it a shot.”

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