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Engaging Literacies, Engaging Place: Using Creative Thinking to Foster and Sustain Community Partnerships

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Engaging Literacies, Engaging Place: Using a New Creative Thinking Model to Foster and Sustain Partnerships in Appalachia

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In order to serve its 22-county service region, Eastern Kentucky University's Noel Studio for Academic Creativity partnered with the University's Teaching & Learning Center to design a model for regional engagement initiatives that fulfills the Studio's mission as a central point for creative activity and literacy learning. After synecdochically describing one such initiative with Madison Middle School, the article demonstrates how the methodology of the embedded hybrid professional learning community is transferrable for sustaining any regional project.

*Creativity is not solely to do with the arts or
about being an artist, but I believe profoundly that we don't
grow into creativity; we grow out of it.
Often we are educated out of it.*

- Ken Robinson, *Out of Our Minds* (2011)

Introduction

It has been said that Appalachia has more problems than 'hollers'. According to the Appalachian Regional Commission (2012), "Appalachia still does not enjoy the same economic vitality as the rest of the nation. Central Appalachia in particular still battles economic distress, with concentrated areas of high poverty, unemployment, poor health, and severe education disparities. And recent economic data show the region has fared far worse in the current recession than the rest of the nation." An interview with Appalachian historian Ron Eller (2009) supports this assessment, as he tells us that central Appalachia has made much less progress in terms of income, poverty rates, educational levels, and general health. Confronting the multitude of these problems is indeed complex, but Eller proposes a general framework: "What would it take to achieve these goals? Nothing less than a new generation of leaders for Eastern Kentucky who dream and think creatively." Building on Eller's proposal, we offer a creative solution for developing partnerships that foreground literacy learning through the creativity that Eller suggests should be a part of Appalachia's progress.

This reflection offers perspective on regional engagement initiatives piloted within Eastern Kentucky University's (EKU) Noel Studio for Academic Creativity that employ creative-thinking strategies to develop literacy skills in students within the Richmond, Kentucky, community. For the purpose of this reflection, we synecdochically focus on one initiative developed in the Noel Studio with Madison Middle School—a collaboration within the region that foregrounds creative thinking in literacy learning—and propose, as a next step, an Embedded Professional Learning Community (EPLC) model developed through a collaboration between the Noel Studio and the University's Teaching & Learning

Center (TLC). Further, we propose that such a model can be replicated throughout Appalachia, creating the new generation of leaders to which Eller alludes—leaders equipped with both critical and *creative* thinking skills necessary to confront many of the region's challenges.

Background

In 2010, the Noel Studio opened at ECU with an expressed commitment to regional stewardship and a goal to “improve the communication and research skills necessary for the advancement of the ECU community” and “serve the ECU community, its service region, and the nation, as a transformative physical and virtual hub for innovation in critical and creative thinking, research, and communication through a variety of modes and media” (Noel Studio, 2011). To establish the Noel Studio as a central point for creative activity and literacy learning, members of the University community have rallied around this vision to develop compelling and productive collaborations that have resulted in not only increased and intensified partnerships within the ECU community but within the regional community as well.

Russell Carpenter, the founding director, began laying the groundwork for the Noel Studio to become a catalyst for partnerships that involve the community in sustained collaborative activities, exploring early concepts for emerging technologies and the community-university partnership (Russell, 2011, p. 390). At the same time, the collaborative relationship between the Noel Studio and the TLC at ECU continued to develop through sessions and projects that focused on growing creative campus initiatives that would benefit students and faculty alike. Additionally, the Noel Studio established several collaborative efforts with schools in ECU's service region, piloting a model where creative thinking concepts guided the development of literacy skills in students, placing Noel Studio administrators and consultants in collaborative sessions within this new space on campus.

Recognizing Need

During the Noel Studio's second semester of operation, Carpenter scheduled several tours of this exciting new space for local high school and middle school administrators. These conversations revealed that local students did not have the opportunity to develop creative thinking skills, as teachers and administrators lamented the fact that, due to pressure to “teach to the test,” time to develop and encourage creative thinking skills is in short supply, and many teachers and administrators are unsure how or if the Commonwealth's adoption of Common Core standards will improve the current situation. Specifically, these meetings illuminated areas with a great deal of potential for development:

- Identified a need for creative thinking and communication development among middle- school students
- Exposed a lack of creative thinking in area schools, especially as they inform literacy skills (writing, oral, visual, and technological) in students
- Envisioned opportunities for teachers and students alike to learn from creative thinking pedagogies in a way that informs their teaching and/or development of multiliteracy skills in students.

It became clear that 1) students could benefit from creative sessions that would expose them to new technologies and software that could be used to enhance their learning and literacy experiences and 2) the Noel Studio would be the ideal inspiring physical space for

these collaborative sessions to take place. This innovative initiative includes areas where students can brainstorm ideas, making thinking visual, on giant dry-erase boards; zones where students can develop interactive multimodal texts; and rooms where students can share their creations with peers. While students had access to technology in the classroom, class time does not always provide ample time for students to play and experiment with technology; the collaborative and creative environment now available to the ECU community could serve an important role in developing community literacies by providing a level of access to technology and information not possible in the traditional classroom setting.

Members of the Noel Studio staff, including the director and research coordinator, came together quickly to envision what these partnerships would look like, finally deciding to pilot small, collaborative sessions that incorporated an integrated pedagogy and offered students the opportunity to explore the synergistic relationship between research, multimodal communications, and creation. Community partnerships had to put technology in the hands of students, allowing them to play with devices, software, and other technologies they might not experience in the classroom; however, the pedagogical approach we would take was more complex than simply using technology for fun.

In developing an approach that would elevate technology from merely a toy or diversion to a pedagogical tool, the Noel Studio looked to partnerships in which access to technology served as a centralizing function. For example, Meghan Griffin, Erin Saitta, Melody Bowdon, and Linda J. Walters, researchers at the University of Central Florida (UCF), an institution that links creativity and partnerships in its strategic plan, advocate for technology use in product creation in their STEM collaboration. As in the partnership with Madison Middle, they employ technology through an integrated approach, providing students with Flip cameras on a field trip to UCF (Griffin, Saitta, Bowdon, & Walters, 2011). The technology served a centralizing role in the partnership by encouraging exploration and allowing students to learn science by producing videos, a modification of the existing assignment that seemingly encourages creativity in students (Griffin et al., 2011). In their collaboration, the digital tools help form the collaborative, participatory model that encourages creativity in students.

In a sense, then, the Noel Studio sought to create what Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robinson (2009) call a “participatory culture” in which the partnership fosters “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement” and “strong support for creating and sharing creations with others” (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 5). They argue that a “[p]articipatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement” (Jenkins et al., 2009, p. 6), a point that regional engagement efforts in the Noel Studio attempt to build upon. We searched for ways to take students through a full invention and creative process. Creative thinking strategies take center stage as a key component that integrates all aspects of students' development of written, oral, visual, technological, and information literacy skills during the Noel Studio sessions.

Although a great deal of scholarship explores service learning and civic engagement (see Bowdon & Carpenter, 2011; Bowdon, Billig, & Holland, 2008; and Deans, Roswell, & Wurr, 2010), and others focus on the use of emerging technology (see especially Bowdon & Carpenter, 2011), this reflection places creative thinking front and center in the design of university-community partnerships. Through the university-community partnership example here, involving Noel Studio staff members, ECU Special Collections and Archives staff, and local middle school students, we hope to illuminate the potential for creative

thinking to serve as a safe, inspiring, and supportive intellectual space for students to develop literacy skills. Gunther Kress, in *Literacy in the New Media Age*, advocates for creativity to become the ordinary, the everyday (Kress, 2003, p. 40), arguing for a command of images or multimodal communication, whereby students would experience the creation process through multiple modes—written, oral, visual, and electronic—in the design of innovative products.

Creative Thinking in Action through Collaboration: The Example

During the fall 2011 semester, a small group of Madison Middle School students spent two hours researching historically significant Madison County sites, including the Bluegrass Army Depot, Bybee Pottery, and the Richmond Cemetery, beginning their experience first in the archives of EKU's Crabbe Library and then spending an additional two hours in the Noel Studio's Discovery Classroom engaging a creative process to explore opportunities for integrating their research into creative digital products. The Noel Studio provides a creative environment where risk-taking and divergent thinking (as compared to the convergent thinking process perpetuated in traditional classrooms through tests) are encouraged. More specifically, the collaboration described here "entailed projects that employed creative thinking and integrated technology, writing, oral communication, and multimedia. Students created artifacts – audio and video files, Prezis, and other creative pieces – based on their research" (Madison Middle School Partners with Noel Studio for Academic Creativity, 2011). The created artifacts encouraged students to engage in creative thinking, a fundamental and powerful concept that Robinson explains further:

Creativity is sometimes associated with free expression, which is partly why some people worry about creativity in education. Critics think of children running wild and knocking down the furniture rather than getting on with serious work. Being creative does usually involve playing with ideas and having fun; enjoyment and imagination. (2011, p. 4-5)

We argue that creative thinking can serve as a compelling link integrating university-community partnerships, especially when read through the lens of the following nine strategies offered by Carpenter, Sweet, and Blythe in the Introduction to Applied Creative Thinking:

- Perception shift
- Piggybacking
- Brainstorming
- Glimmers
- Collaboration
- Flow
- Play
- Pattern recognition
- Metaphor

As proof, we point to the students involved in this partnership who began with a broad research topic and looked at it through a variety of perspectives, based upon the most interesting research they uncovered in the archives, the medium of that research, and opportunities for communicating their research in the most effective ways possible.

Madison Middle students spent the first of two sessions exploring EKU Libraries Special Collections and Archives, discovering that the historical record of their topics went beyond the traditional text-on-paper resources they were accustomed to using in their re-

search projects. By experiencing hands-on archival research and discussing their topics with EKU's experienced archives staff, the students discovered that the rich historical record of their Madison County topics included resources as diverse as maps, deeds, images, recorded oral histories, and even three-dimensional objects, like pottery from Bybee and the headstones, monuments, and wrought-iron fence of Richmond Cemetery. The mediums of available research and their interactions with the research initiated a perception shift in the way the students approached their projects, as well as the ways in which they could present their research.

During the second session, students focused first on exploring what they found and what they could do with it, aided by mobile dry-boards, computers, and large-scale projection screens in the Noel Studio's Discovery Classroom. Students were tasked with archiving the histories of the Bluegrass Army Depot, Bybee Pottery, and the Richmond Cemetery in such a way as to make the history of each accessible and engaging for a general audience, one who may or may not have access to the physical history housed in EKU's Special Collections and Archives. As the students began to explore research projects beyond the traditional, they ventured outside the Discovery Classroom, making use of spaces and technology beyond that afforded to them inside even the technologically-sophisticated Discovery Classroom.

How did the experience facilitate creative thinking? Like the first session, the second session was hands-on, providing students with access to Flip cameras, touch-screen monitors, and iPods, encouraging them to push beyond the expected. Creative-thinking strategies were employed by breaking students up into two collaborating groups, one *brainstorming* in the Invention Space, while the other explored ideas on a touch-screen monitor. Noel Studio staff members encouraged students to share ideas freely, focusing on generating possibilities for the final product, without initially assessing students' emerging ideas. Students and staff members began crafting ideas visually in the Noel Studio's larger collaborative areas—one group using high-tech monitors to navigate the Bluegrass Army Depot visually in Google Earth, by which students could plot important places and discuss what the research said about them, while the other group storyboarded their research on a dry-erase board with movable, writeable magnets, suggesting key research points. Students were encouraged to *piggyback* on others' suggestions and to *catch glimmers* of undeveloped ideas, providing opportunities to expand their projects into something more exciting and engaging than they had initially envisioned.

Students and staff members engaged in literacy learning with clear goals but open possibilities. All the while, staff members suggested ideas and provided access to technology that would enable students to *recognize patterns* and *shift their perception* about the research and final product, which took on a creative look as students progressed. While students came in with plans for more traditional hardcopy scrapbooks and brochures, they left with excitement about creating metaphors, digital stories, and interactive maps that would be archived digitally and attainable by all Richmond community members with access to technology. The products envisioned through the Noel Studio and Madison Middle School partnership make the historical record of several historically significant Madison County sites accessible and engaging to an audience beyond the one with direct physical access to the artifacts housed in Special Collections and Archives; so-called "old news" became fresh and relevant once more when presented through the playful approach of the young students.

A Model for Disseminating Creativity and Fostering Regional Engagement

How do we sustain partnerships such as the one documented here between the Noel Studio and Madison Middle School? Marjori Maddox Krebs, exploring what teachers say about service learning, focuses on sustainability or “the continuation of a program over time, with long-term partnerships, supportive stakeholders, and secure funding sources” (87). Repurposing a model for collaboration is a workable solution.

Two means of sustaining and increasing partnership participation are the Community of Practice (CoP), developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and elaborated on by Wenger (1998), and the Professional Learning Community (PLC). We prefer using the latter over the former for a number of reasons:

1. **Experience:** PLCs have become a vital part of our campus culture in the previous five years, as the TLC and the College of Education have sponsored well over fifty PLCs;

2. **Background:** PLCs began life as an educational product, whereas the CoP was an invention of business;

3. **Intentionality:** PLCs are created for a specific purpose, but that is not necessarily so for CoPs;

4. **Purpose:** PLCs are created to develop a product; CoPs may continue perpetually with no product other than shared knowledge and experience.

5. **Formality:** PLCs are more formal in their structure, and they usually begin with a specific problem that needs solving, whereas CoPs may simply meet and wander, learning as they proceed.

As noted, the TLC developed a model for professional learning communities (PLCs) that has experienced a great deal of success bringing faculty together for regular conversation. We suggest that this model can be repurposed to inform the design of community-university partnerships developed by the Noel Studio. Furthermore, we also suggest that this model makes partnerships more sustainable, a move toward engaging, as Krebs (2008) says, supportive stakeholders. In fact, the TLC trained the Southeast Technical Assistance and Continuing Education Center (TACE), a resource network for vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies across the southeast from Florida to Kentucky, in the model’s usage, and TACE employs it now to coordinate training programs.

The PLC model is in itself creative, being a hybrid that combines the strengths of the Cox (2004) postsecondary model—a group of eight to twelve members, engagement in an active and collaborative program, bi-weekly meetings, and the presentation of a group goal at an appropriate venue—with the Stiggins-DuFour K-12 paradigm:

A professional learning community is a group of educators committed to working collaboratively in on-going processes of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve. PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators. (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005)

Our hybrid model focuses both on scholarship and assessment; its purpose is the creation and dissemination of knowledge for a general public (campus, community, or both) rather than for a single student. By collaborating with community partners, in this case Madison Middle School, members of the university learn about opportunities and chal-

lenges faced by the populations living, learning, and working within EKU’s service region. By scholarship, we mean learning from both the literature of engagement as well as the experiences of others, and by assessment we are focusing on theories that have been tested and demonstrated to produce positive results. Moreover, just as cells replicate, we encourage our PLCs to expand by having each member not only participate in the original PLC, but to create another PLC (see Figure 1).

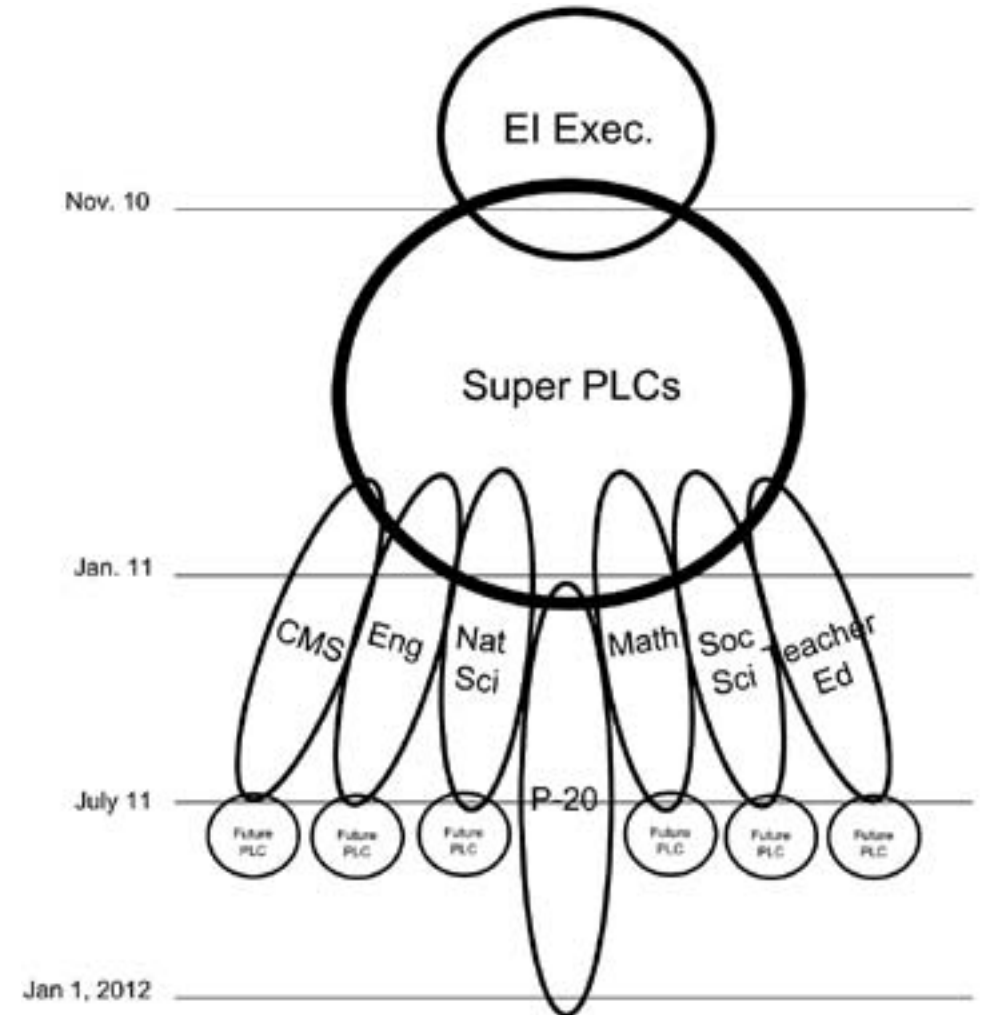


Figure 1: Embedded PLC Model

While the above model was used for our Eastern Initiative (EI) to align K-12 common core standards with the University’s general education and teacher preparation courses, this process could work just as well on a community or even regional level with a number of different subjects. For instance, instead of training Madison Middle School students in creative thinking strategies one week, students from Estill County the next, and Rockcastle County later in the month, this fall the Noel Studio intends to form a Creative Thinking

PLC with interested members, including students and educators, from 8-10 counties within EKU's service region. Noel Studio members will serve as the Executive PLC (level 1), and representatives from the selected counties will function as the Super PLC (level 2). When the training for Super PLC is complete, those members will return to their home counties, form new PLCs (level 3), train the members, and even expand the training to new counties (level 4).

The advantages of the embedded hybrid PLC are obvious. First, under traditional methods, the Noel Studio might have to train all 22 counties separately, which necessitates a great deal of time, money, and personnel. Under the embedded PLC model, the original trainees learn not only the subject matter, but receive practice in facilitating a PLC, and when they return to their home counties, they can each train 8-12 more, who can train 8-12 more, and so forth. Elizabeth Long Lingo and Steven J. Tepper, in "The Creative Campus" (2010), suggest that "reorienting a college around creativity holds promise." We agree and add that reorienting a campus community around creativity can invigorate youth, inspire and challenge teachers, and develop solutions to important community problems. The great deal of interest experienced already in the Noel Studio's regional engagement initiatives has yielded additional and larger meetings, bringing together more voices from the community united in sustaining and even expanding existing programs and partnerships.

Summary

This reflection, then, shares a vision for making these regional engagement initiatives more sustainable and systematic so that our creative campus movement can also inspire creative community movements. The learning community model is a compelling next step toward the development of initiatives that truly engage the regional community, while encouraging participation among students and teachers alike in the creative-thinking process. To be most effective, though, models must be replicable, involving insights from the community based on need and collaborative efforts from the university that enhance educational and professional opportunities within the region. The relationship between the university and community should be reciprocal, with both sharing information and learning from the collaboration. We believe such initiatives, when used by trained groups, can be implemented to address issues in Appalachia beyond education, such as poverty, unemployment, and poor health, by developing creative leaders capable of assuming leadership roles within their communities.

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Moving from place to place: Exploring the complexities of being an academic and activist in/for Appalachia

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Maintaining the life of being both an academic and activist can be emotional and immensely difficult. In our efforts to achieve career advancement and to help others we may find ourselves moving between many places and living out the contradictions and tensions that result from such movement. Often forced to produce inaccessible, jargon filled articles, the majority of academics rarely find the opportunity to give back to the communities where they conduct research. How do we as academics then, come to terms with the work that we do? Can we truly be both activists and academics and, if so, in what ways?

This paper is a reflective article, interleaved with autobiographical details in hopes of enhancing my exploration of the academic-activist dichotomy. First, I examine the need for new economic development opportunities in Appalachia and explore my own attempts to document and foster alternative economic practices. Then, I highlight my own struggles as an academic, activist, and native working in Eastern Kentucky and the ways through which I attempt to blur the lines among these roles. Finally, I offer a few words to those who move from place to place in hopes of helping themselves and others. Throughout each section, I emphasize the power of place(s) in shaping my understanding of Appalachia and my duties as an academic/activist.

My place(s)...

I am writing this essay during a very strange time in my life. At present, I am a PhD student who, for the most part, stays hidden away writing in a small apartment in a relatively large city. Looking out my living room window, I can see nothing but a concrete parking lot and a few cars parked beside my own. The scene from my bedroom window isn't much better; there's nothing there but train tracks and an old (and probably unsafe?) electrical grid. After having spent 18 years of my life nestled in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky, such urban landscapes can be a bit depressing for me. Such landscapes, coupled with the daunting pressures of academic life, often result in my lying awake at night and wondering why I'm voluntarily in this place. At the same time, I think about my experiences in past places and I quickly remember why I have chosen to stay and want to be an academic.

In this piece then, I seek to foster a dialogue on the challenges that many face in academia, regardless of professional rank or level of institution. Instead of following a more traditional reflective article format I have chosen to write in an introspective manner, which is admittedly not typical of many publications that one might see in engagement journals such as, for example, the *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*. For the most part I indulge in reminiscences, anxieties, and aspirations, contextualized within/through places. Though I make note of theoretical and methodological practices that I use within my own research and aspire to make some contribution to the discussion of possible