

Words to Live By

A Community of Teachers

Why this Document? Even in the closest, most affectionate of families, problems arise which are unavoidable. Miscommunication occurs or the dedications of some members of the group flags. It is in such predicaments where relationships, personal identities, and communities can be strengthened or injured. In order to maintain a healthy community, we must be able to overcome such obstacles. And in order to do this, it is vital that we lay down a strong foundation of the things we value for ourselves and expect of each other. What these things essentially boil down to are: our commitment to each other, both personally and professionally, and our commitment to becoming successful educators. If each of us learns to value and honor these commitments, our effectiveness as students, teachers, and members of a community is greatly strengthened.

Our Commitment to Each Other

By opting to join **A Community of Teachers (CoT)**, we are saying that we want the process of becoming a teacher to be more than a solitary pursuit. As teachers, we need to learn how to help each other to become effective. Teaching also occurs in a social context; that, too, demands that together we learn how to enhance our social skills as we learn how to help each other.

Communication: Community is an empty concept without communication. Access to E-mail enables us to build and maintain this communication with ease. Unless all of us regularly use that system, its power to build community is diminished; communication with some of us is closed off and some of us may become fringe members of the community. We each need to acquire the habit of checking our E-Mail every day or two. If we can't, we need to stay in contact with people through other means. We need to be mindful of the importance of helping those who care about us know our current state of well-being.

Support: One of the advantages that we have in this program is its support system. In this community, we may be more aware of the needs of others in our program, and when we sense that another member needs some help, we should offer it. When we need the help of others, we need to learn how to ask for it. We should be able to trust others in the community and, in turn, offer them our understanding and support. We all become resources to each other through the acts of sharing, collaborating, and mentoring.

Reaching Out: Mentor Teachers are important members of our community. We need to make them feel a welcome part of the community, for example, by occasionally inviting them to attend our Seminars. All members of the community can learn from each other.

Improving the Community and the Program: CoT operates on the philosophy of one person-one vote. Being an active member of **CoT** means, not only being responsible for the creation and development of a community within a Seminar, but also within the whole program. Our governance actions in our monthly Community Meetings are **CoT's** self-correcting mechanism. The process places the responsibility on each member and the community as a whole to determine how the program should evolve to meet new circumstances. Any **CoT** member can propose a change in the program's operation and every member has an obligation to exercise his or her role of considering, shaping, and voting on these proposals for change. The dialogue that occurs across Seminars as we deliberate about changes becomes an important vehicle for building a program-wide sense of community.

Our Commitment to the Profession

We take much from the settings in which we work and the people with whom we work. We need to find ways also to "give back." Professional development needs to be an ongoing process. Our commitment to improving ourselves and our colleagues should be clear.

Finding a Mentor Teacher or Mentor Colleague: A major task for those new to the program is to find a Mentor Teacher (for those who will be student teaching) or a Mentor Colleague (for those already teaching full-time). A Mentor Teacher must hold a license in your teaching area. They need to spend the equivalent of one day a week in the schools pursuing that goal. A good place to start is to accompany another group member to his or her field site. Even if you already have a Mentor and school in mind, please use this opportunity to look at a variety of middle and high school settings before finalizing your decision and asking a teacher to work with you. Some beginning community members already have extensive observations and work in schools; those experiences can satisfy appropriate parts of this need to experience a variety of settings. Other community members are valuable resources in finding mentors, particularly when they describe rather than evaluate teachers whom they've visited: a teacher who was not favored by one member may fit another to a tee. We have learned that, in some ways, the program doesn't really start until a member finds a Mentor Teacher. A beginning member's goal should be to seek actively, if not to find, a Mentor Teacher by the end of her or his first semester in the program, second semester at the latest. Students who enter during their freshmen year have until the end of their sophomore year to find a Mentor. Maintaining strong, productive relationships with our Mentor Teachers is an ongoing responsibility.

Some beginning CoT students are already full-time teachers. They face a parallel task of finding a Mentor Colleague in their building who would welcome the opportunity to periodically discuss their practice. A Mentor Colleague who teaches the same subject is ideal but it's essential that the person value the opportunity for dialogue.

The Apprenticeship: We need to spend the equivalent of about one day a week in the schools. Students have found that, if they can work out the additional transportation difficulties, spending two half days in their schools is noticeably superior to one whole day. They have more contact and therefore more of a sense of continuity with their classes. Because they work with fewer classes they have fewer names to learn and can more easily build relationships with their students. Asking your Mentor Teacher to recommend a schedule is a good place to begin.

Attendance: Regular, punctual attendance is *essential* to our work in the field. On days when we must be absent from the schools, we need to be sure to notify our Mentors as soon as possible, but at least thirty minutes prior to the beginning of the school day. (Ask your Mentor Teacher for a phone number where he or she can be reached in case of emergency.) We must deport ourselves professionally in the schools and to be both prompt and reliable in our work there. The key to being allowed to exercise increasing amounts of responsibility is to engender increasing amounts of trust.

Giving Back: We need to look for ways to thank our Mentors for all that they're doing for us. We need to be on the lookout for resources that will enrich their classrooms. We can share a good book with them, do the legwork to nail down a guest speaker for a class, and/or invite them to attend a stimulating lecture with us. When the program is working properly, all the community members benefit. Maintaining our connections with our Seminars during student teaching and after graduation are very valuable ways to give back.

Completing the Portfolio: Having a sense of where we're headed is fundamental. We each need to develop a system for classifying and storing evidence *as we accumulate it* and are committed to

completing the Portfolio within one year of the last day of our student teaching semester. The Community has decided to abide by what has become known as the 1-10-20 rule. The rule, as it pertains to Apprentices and students who are full-time teachers, is described in the handbook (p. xiv).

Periodic Self-Evaluation: A valued habit of mind of some professionals is periodically reconsidering their practice. At least once a semester, preferably sometime before its hectic closing weeks, each member—faculty and student alike—should evaluate the current state of his or her recent performance in the program. If a Seminar group deems it useful, these self-evaluations might even become the topic of a Seminar session.

Our Commitment as Members of a University Community

Being part of a major university community carries its own obligations. A **Community of Teachers (CoT)** must be more than a safe, secure place to be; indeed, *CoT requires* us to take risks. *CoT* needs to function as an academic program that meets the standards and expectations of a credit-granting professional school.

Irrespective of our roles in the program—professor or student or the particular Seminar we attend—we all have an opportunity and a responsibility to contribute to the professional climate within which our work is realized and within which we interact. The university rightly is a demanding, challenging place; we welcome the test of our tenacity that it offers. Some of the ways in which we respond to that challenge are:

Participating in the Dialogue: A seminar, by definition, is a time for discussion and reflection. It is not a time for a lecture or for members to "absorb" content, but rather, a time for all of us to engage in conversations about professional matters. Every professional is also a person and matters of a personal nature invariably enter into these conversations. Thus, our Seminars will be only as good as we collectively make them. Regular attendance is important. We need to come to the group prepared to think carefully about issues, to contribute our points of view to discussions, and to be responsive to the contributions of others. These conversations are enlivened by the sharing of our most pressing concerns and passions. Continuous contact is also important. We need to let our group know when we will have to miss a Seminar session. Seminar leaders should, as a matter of course, contact Seminar members who have an uninformed absence.

Reading: Our common reading works best when it is negotiated by the group and builds on the group's prior experiences and reading; if one of us discovers a book that others may want to read, she should share it with the group. Our common reading is an important springboard into group discussions. But it shouldn't represent the limit of our professional reading. For example, we should each be building and periodically updating a bibliography of the professional reading we've done as a group, *and* the professional reading we are doing as individuals.

Assignments: The best *CoT* assignments have clear connections with the work of teachers; such assignments often result in products that naturally find their way into our Portfolios. Even when organizing themes and major assignments have been constructed through group deliberation, individuals will not find every assignment equally useful. In some cases, we may have already completed a similar activity, or we may see it as inappropriate to our circumstances. Preferably, we should negotiate an alternative that does fit our current stage of development at such times.

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