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Middleweb: A Dynamic Internet-Based Professional Learning Community

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Abstract

The MiddleWeb virtual professional community emerged in the year 2000 as an outgrowth of MiddleWeb, a large website dedicated to middle grades reform. It is supported by grants from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. The community thrives through a collection of interrelated email listservs, which are moderated by MiddleWeb editor John Norton and volunteers from among the community's 600 members. The authors believe MiddleWeb demonstrates the potential of an Internet-based professional learning community to support personal growth, professional development and school improvement. They also argue that such a community's listserv-based environment removes many traditional barriers to true professional communication, including time constraints, and reduces the professional isolation that so often stifles teacher development. The listserv format differentiates professional development since it allows for follow-up and reconsideration of topics according to individual members' needs, something a single session in-service by its very nature does not provide. The authors acknowledge that many listserv groups fail to develop into true virtual professional communities and identify six conditions they believe are necessary prerequisites to such development.

Odd Ducks...Birds of a Feather...MiddleWebbers.... Any of these phrases might describe our Internet virtual community — a gathering point in cyberspace for over 600 educators who hold common beliefs that go well beyond our mutual commitment to provide efficient and effective classroom instruction. In little more than three years' time, the MiddleWeb listserv community has developed its own shared culture, populated by educators who embody the core values and practices necessary to teach and influence young minds.

“The MiddleWeb listserv continues to be a resource that helps me to

be reflective about my thoughts and practices.” - Chris Toy, Principal, Freeport Middle School, Freeport, Maine

“The professional ‘cyber-community’ supported by MiddleWeb helped me find the courage to return to teaching after a difficult and ultimately unsuccessful first year. The educators who make up our wide-flung community provided the support, concrete help, mentoring and cheering section I needed to re-enter the classroom.” - Joanne Payling, 2nd Year Teacher, California

Our group of middle school educators has grown into a tribe of teacher-learners ambitious to improve their craft. Each of our 600

members found their way to the [MiddleWeb](#) website. Friends referred some; others say they were surfing the Web, searching for a professional network they couldn't quite define. One way or another, they discovered the listserv's [archived conversations](#) and recognized that “These are my people.”



The Internet offers many opportunities to communicate with individuals who share a common interest – chatboards, newsgroups, small email rings, and email listservs. In the education field alone, there are hundreds of listserv options run by diverse groups including university centers, education associations and content-area groups. Some smaller lists are labors of love, supported through the volunteer effort of one or more teachers. While we acknowledge email listservs may not be for everyone - the daily influx of email and the constant stimulation of fresh points of view overwhelm some visitors and they quickly depart. But, for those who can adjust to the continuous flow of ideas, an email listserv offers a greater opportunity to join in discussions with other professionals in ways that were never possible before the emergence of the Internet.

Sustained conversation around professional theory and practice is scarce in most schools, hindered by institutional and time constraints. Listservs remove many of those structural barriers to professional communication. Since listservs are “asynchronous,” they breach the time barrier that so often stifles communication among teachers in so-called “real time.” As noted in the school reform work of [Michael Fullan](#), removing this time barrier is key to creating and sustaining lasting educational improvement (Sparks, D., 2003). Free to communicate as their own schedules allow, teachers who participate in listservs can establish professional connections as quickly as they can type. Listservs can remove other barriers as well, including the barriers that often arise through a natural human tendency to categorize and stereotype. In a virtual community, no one is tall or short, bright-eyed or wrinkled, black or white or brown. People are judged by the insights they bring to the table (or, in this case, the computer monitor).

Despite these advantages (and all of the listserv choices available on the Internet), it has been our joint experience that few listserv groups evolve into true professional communities. MiddleWeb, and perhaps a few dozen others, are the

exception, not the rule. Based on feedback from our members, most of whom have participated on several other Internet listservs, we have identified several conditions that seem to be necessary prerequisites to the establishment of a virtual professional community:

1. A shared affinity (in our case, middle grades education)
2. A moderator or revolving group of moderators who are skillful at maintaining the momentum of the conversation(s), able to quickly solve technical problems and head off disputes, and attentive in ways that assure that everyone who participates feels their opinions are valued and their questions are addressed
3. A mission statement that defines the boundaries of the listserv's conversation
4. A code of behavior that is gently but firmly enforced by the moderators
5. A permanent record or archive of the community dialog
6. A critical mass of listserv members who are knowledgeable and insightful, and who possess the skill to communicate their expertise via email

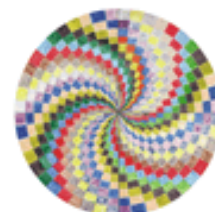
A Profile of Our Virtual Professional Community

We are teachers from small and large schools; teachers whose experience ranges from many years to just a few; teachers who teach in urban, suburban, rural, public and private settings; teachers from many countries around the world who have come together with administrators, staff developers, college professors and others to talk about the teaching life. Some arrive at the pre-service level needing all sorts of support and help. Others come with many years of experience, still anxious to refine and deepen their understanding of their craft. Our common bond is our commitment to young adolescents during their middle-grades years.

On a busy day, as many as 50-60 messages may be posted on our main discussion list. We average about 30 daily messages that contribute to as many as a half-dozen conversation "strings." More than half of our 600 members rarely say anything at all. "I wouldn't think of suggesting that our MiddleWeb lurkers leave the listserv," says John Norton, who began the listserv in 2000 and continues to serve as chief moderator. "I get private messages from them almost daily saying things like, 'I've never posted to MiddleWeb but it has changed everything about my teaching.'" Often new members will choose to lurk for a while, gauging the temperament of the listserv, and then find the confidence to begin to express their own understandings about teaching and learning.

We are a civil, open-hearted community – and an "open" list, where none of us know for sure whether individuals from our physical world are listening. Yet,

MiddleWeb members exhibit a remarkable level of trust. They often write in great detail and with considerable frankness about what goes on in their classrooms. Reading through posts on the listserv becomes an exercise in daily reflection and the progressive buildup of skills. Dewey's notion of lifelong, constructivist learning is brought to life in the continuous, dynamic give-and-take of our



MiddleWeb is a
circle of

conversation, which constantly reshapes itself to meet the needs and interests of our members. This allows teachers to break away from the isolation and inertia of the old model of teacher as a highly individualistic, independent contractor.

Through its culture of collaboration and coaching, MiddleWeb helps teachers consider ideas that will nudge them into fundamental shifts of pedagogy. By creating access to the insights and experiences of hundreds of accomplished educators, the MiddleWeb listserv demonstrates the potential of a virtual professional community to serve as the “master teacher” we all want in our classrooms, giving advice and direction on the spot. Often, members will exchange lesson plans and other teaching materials through private email or by requesting the MiddleWeb moderator to post a helpful resource on the website where anyone can download it.

The transfer of knowledge from what is discussed on the listserv to what is practiced in our classrooms and schools is evident in the follow-up stories regularly posted by our members. Assistant Principal Alexis Weiner says that MiddleWeb “has become my touchstone as I continue to learn about teaching middle school students. MiddleWeb broadens my network of colleagues and allows me to risk intellectual curiosity on a daily basis. This is profound and amazing work. I am always amazed at the intellect that abounds ‘out there’ - from thoughtful, reflective new teachers to those sages with the wisdom of experience - all willing and openly honest.”

MiddleWeb listserv members are fond of describing themselves as “odd ducks” who revel in working with early adolescents and prefer teaching at the middle level. Many of us crave a professional collegiality that seems to be missing in our own schools. Mid-life career changer Carolyn Beitzel, who teaches in a large suburban school system, felt the lack of community within her district and came to MiddleWeb looking for like-minded colleagues and mentors. “MiddleWeb allows me to work within a community of educators who are definitely committed to lifelong learning and striving to make themselves better educators,” she says. “It allows me the opportunity to talk with other teachers who may be facing similar issues with their students, parents, administration, or faculty. But I think, most importantly it gives me the opportunity to be a ‘fly on the wall.’ I can listen to conversations and glean information and participate when I choose. I can also disagree and debate merits of strategies without the body language of someone who is angry, bored, or unagreeable — no rolling eyes! I can listen collegially to another’s opinion and take what I want from the conversation. Being in a ‘virtual’ faculty lounge’ takes away so much pressure to ‘perform’ for your peers.”

Whether a suburban, urban, rural, or small town middle school teacher, we were all represented in the posts describing ineffective, time-wasting professional development sessions in our schools. So many times, Beitzel said, teachers sit through professional development sessions that have little relevance to their own teaching. Topics as diverse as Standards, Anti-Bullying, Curriculum Content, or Graphic Organizers are all applicable to a teacher’s development. But when those sessions provide little to no opportunity for meaningful dialogue among teachers, nor follow-up and reflection, then too often less is taken away

than intended. “The problem I see in a school as large as mine (127 faculty and staff) is that even when we attend a professional development session that is meaningful, there is no follow up,” said Beitzel. “We don't meet in small teams to develop a plan for implementation. We don't implement and then reflect.”

For Beitzel and many others, MiddleWeb provides opportunity for reflection and dialogue. The opportunity always exists to discuss ideas, test them out in a physical environment, return to the listserv with new insights, suggestions or questions, and continue the cycle of learning. Laura Robb, an acclaimed reading and curriculum expert, wrote that the best staff development is collaborative in nature and follows a coaching model (Robb, L. 2000). In a successful staff development meeting, teachers support one another as evidenced by an increase in reflection of shared expertise, where the teachers pose questions, discuss classroom practices, and suggest books and articles that could expand knowledge. The MiddleWeb listserv has proven to be a place where teachers can return to reflect, moan, celebrate and ask for guidance. Listserv member Carolyn Wilson Koershner has stressed time and again “the listserv community is a critical element in supporting authentic growth and reflective practice.” She attends professional development sessions quite frequently in her education job but has never been a part of one that “created an effective community for follow-up and reflection” such as the MiddleWeb listserv.

The quality of the MiddleWeb conversation can be reinforced by the fact that many instructors in teacher education courses have recommended or require their students join the listserv to absorb not only the ideas and philosophies being debated but also the insight that lifelong learning is a necessary ingredient of quality teaching. Often, these students will initiate discussions of their own; as they grow accustomed to the give and take of MiddleWeb and begin to visualize what it will be like to have their own classrooms.

Stories from the MiddleWeb Archives

“The greatest part of MiddleWeb is that it stretches beyond our [own] professional development and right into our classrooms where our students benefit directly from what we do here,” wrote Marsha Ratzel during a recent discussion. “So frequently, discussions that are centered around the unique needs of middle schoolers are overlooked in professional development sessions. That’s just not the case at MiddleWeb. It is always assumed and the focus. Since we all teach middle school, we have a broad set of common experiences from which to draw that transcends geography and that becomes a powerful tool for professional growth. We just automatically understand what the other teacher is going through because we’ve been there with our own student.”

On many occasions an idea that has been brought up on the listserv by one teacher is then taken by others, revised to meet the needs of individual classrooms, and discussed again and again as members put the idea into action. A prime example is our “In A Million Words Or Less” discussion. Deborah Bova began our dialogue when she described how she used this parent-engagement activity at the beginning of the year. In brief, Deborah sent a note home asking parents to please send back a letter sharing in a million words or less what they wanted her to know about their child. Other members of the MiddleWeb listserv quickly duplicated Deborah’s idea. Soon, listserv members were reporting on the results of their own experiment with the Million Words



engagement strategy. For most teachers, parent response was overwhelming and positive, and nearly everyone was able to share new insights about their students growing out of the parents' heartfelt communications. Chris Toy, principal of Freeport Middle School in Maine, took the idea a step further by offering to let parents in his school write poetry or draw illustrations as they told the story about their child (modeling differentiated instruction). List member Charlie Lindgren shared a model letter teachers could adapt. By the beginning of the next school year, more than 100 listserv members were using the activity, which was featured in an article at the EducationWorld.com website.

MiddleWeb's 24/7/365 conversation often turns to the promise and problems of technology in the classroom. During a recent discussion, several teachers shared the addresses of their weblogs ("blogs") where they journal regularly, reflecting on their own practice. The idea intrigued other MiddleWeb listserv members, and the MiddleWeb website now lists links to more than 15 teacher blogs. The discussion about teacher blogs soon led to a discussion about teaching blogs directed by Marsha Ratzel, list member and technology coach, who is experimenting with blogs as a learning tool for students.

Lea Molczan, a novice teacher, asked the listserv for advice about how to start a reading workshop. The coaching she received from more experienced teachers inspired self-confidence: "I am ready...to implement a reading and writing workshop in my LA class.... Now that I have 3 years under my belt, I understand that it takes time to develop any program and it's okay to take baby steps... that's the biggest lesson I've learned from MiddleWeb..."



From time to time, MiddleWeb listserv members band together and undertake a joint online project on a special dedicated listserv. In the summer of 2001, a cadre of listserv members agreed to attempt to develop an integrated curriculum unit together. The following summer, another group worked on a gender equity project. Perhaps our most remarkable success in this area has been the MiddleWeb Reading/Writing Workshop Project, which began in the fall of 2001 as a special discussion among a group of 30 teachers with a special interest in students struggling with literacy issues. The Project, which also features a weekly journal entry written by listserv member and literacy coach Juli Kendall, continues today with a 300-member listserv of its own!

Bill Ivey, a charter member of the Middleweb listserv, is working on a team to design and implement a Middle School program at an independent all-girls school in Massachusetts. "The sheer quantity of knowledge being shared in an atmosphere of unceasing professionalism and supportiveness [has been] extraordinary," he said. Ivey points to MiddleWeb's frequent book chats as "particularly helpful" in communicating a strong sense of the big picture of teaching.

The first book discussed was "Turning Points 2000" by Gayle



Davis and Anthony Jackson and is often cited as one of the fundamentally important books in middle grades education. The authors, among the most influential in their field, agreed to participate in a weeklong exchange of ideas, questions, and other musings. Bill Ivey was among the first to raise a question:

"I was wondering, regarding adolescent development, what books and other sources you would suggest, and what activities, to a teacher making the transition to middle grades education?" Gayle Davis responded with a comprehensive and well-explained list of resources. Teachers on the listserv then spent the next week discussing ideas on how to lay the groundwork for and bring about transformative change in our schools, arriving at a deeper understanding of the necessity of a holistic approach to school reform. At the end of the week, amidst a flurry of thanks from many participants, Gayle Davis wrote, "It's your wisdom and your willingness to collaborate (there's that word again) in forums like this one that will make the difference. I've been honored at the chance to see your ideas and your questions...."

Among the other authors who have visited with the MiddleWeb community are John Lounsbury, often called a "father" of the middle school movement; reading experts Chris Tovani and Ellin Keene; middle grades master teacher Rick Wormeli (who is also a member of the listserv); prominent middle grades reformer Hayes Mizell; and parent-community relations expert Anne Henderson. A book chat in 2002 featured Tom Dickinson and Deborah Butler, author-editors of "Reinventing the Middle School," that challenges middle grades educators to reexamine the core principles of the middle school movement. Bill Ivey wrote that "when Tom Dickinson thanked me privately for my own ideas and support, I realized I had been given an even greater gift: I had come to believe in myself as an educator more than ever before, and it was then that I first began to nurture a dream someday to coordinate a middle school which would build on the ideas and models (described by our authors), a dream toward which I am working today."

MiddleWeb's Future

It is difficult to imagine a vehicle in the "physical world" that could bring together so many knowledge-hungry teachers and make it possible for them to exchange ideas over an extended period with such prominent education thinkers. The sheer cost of moving individuals around in physical space would be prohibitive. Ironically, however, many philanthropies and foundation program officers remain highly skeptical about the value of virtual communities in advancing education reform. Last summer, listserv members learned that MiddleWeb's long-time support from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation was coming to an end. The listserv was immediately filled with messages of shock and dismay. MiddleWeb had become such an important and integral part of the professional lives of those who log on everyday that the thought of it not being around was quite impossible to imagine.

But MiddleWebbers are a stalwart tribe, and the depression passed quickly. Members began to brainstorm about ways to raise the funds needed to keep both the listserv and website alive. They also began to collect stories based on the prompt: "Why is this list so important to you?"

Lea Molczan's post reflected the thoughts and feelings of many long-time members. "When I started student teaching five years ago, the Internet became a valuable resource to me. I could spend hours sifting through information on topics relating to my Language Arts class. A professor of mine suggested that each of us look for something more on the Web – a listserv. She gave us several recommendations based on our grade levels and subject matter." On her first attempt, Lea says that instead of finding a place "to call my home," she had stumbled into "a secret organization and I didn't know the password."

Lea continued her search and came across MiddleWeb. "I decided to give the listserv a try and I was immediately grateful that I did. This group was so accepting and so markedly different than the previous list. I was astounded by the conversations that were taking place and the work that was being done by its members and by its moderator." Three years later, Lea has never once thought of leaving the list. "This group has become my sounding board and my creative genius when times were rough. We have shared the good, the bad and the ugly, and all the while we remained the professionals that we are. That's not to say that we don't cut up and enjoy a good joke or a laugh. On the contrary, this list is quite casual and hysterical at times. We are, after all, middle school teachers – the odd ducks! We are a unique bunch caught, whether by choice or by assignment, in the middle. We need a place to vent, question and share our successes and failures."

Perhaps the ultimate proof that the MiddleWeb listserv has evolved into a true professional learning

community is the upcoming Walk the Talk Conference, scheduled for the summer of 2004 in Canmore, Alberta, Canada. As is so often the case, the idea for this physical gathering of listserv members came up in casual conversation on the listserv. A whirlwind ensued. A special listserv was created, an online survey conducted, and before anyone could quite believe it, hotel space had been secured and a listserv team was putting together an agenda that will feature presentations by a variety of MiddleWeb members. While we only expect about 60 members of the listserv to be able to attend what we're describing as the "First Annual MiddleWeb F2F" ("Face to Face"), we are hard-pressed to think of another example of a completely voluntary, virtual group staging a physical meeting of this magnitude.

Walking the Talk 2004



Individualistic, independent teachers don't survive in today's atmosphere of high stakes teaching without a community of support. The importance of collaboration and the willingness of teachers to try to coach each other to new heights of professionalism is why members feel MiddleWeb is an essential element in our professional lives. Our community exists outside of physical space but it is as tangible as any you could find walking into a school building. Most school reform experts would attest that our community has the hallmark attributes of a successful school culture. The exciting part of our experiment is its replicability for other groups who wish to harness the power of the Internet to build lasting professional relationships and accelerate their own professional growth. As Bill Ivey wrote on the listserv not long ago, "I have made connections with some of the finest educators in the world, and it is fair to say that my participation in an online learning community is one of the most important reasons I am the kind of

teacher I am.”

Meridian readers who have an interest in joining the MiddleWeb listserv group are invited to contact listserv moderator John Norton at norton@middleweb.com. Please indicate that you learned of our virtual community through this article.

Other listservs of interest to middle grades educators include:
MIDDLE-L (For teachers of grades 5-8):
<http://ecap.crc.uiuc.edu/listserv/middle-l.html>

National Council of Teachers of English online communities
<http://www.ncte.org/member/community>

The MiddleWeb Reading/Writing Workshop Project
<http://www.middleweb.com/ReadWrkshp/RWindex.html>

About the Authors

Carolyn Faulkner-Beitzel, after eighteen years as a Registered Nurse graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a Master's of Science degree in Education and changed career paths. She has taught American History and General Science for several years at Beverly Hills Middle School. Along with teaching, she is active in the local teacher's association and regional and local chapters of the Middle School Association. Carolyn recently completed a year-long commitment with MiddleWeb as an online diarist and is pursuing her goal as a life long learner by returning to school for additional certification as a Social Studies Supervisor and Reading Specialist.
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Marsha Ratzel, an NBCT in Middle School Science works for the Blue Valley School District as a Coordinating Teacher for Technology and in Pleasant Ridge Middle School as a half-time classroom 7th grade Computer teacher. Marsha has served in many wide-ranging capacities in her district which include classroom teacher of science, math, social studies; school improvement coach for six schools; creating and managing the district's National Board mentoring program for district candidates, and most recently teacher coach for integrating technology into the curriculum.
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John Norton serves as editor of MiddleWeb (www.middleweb.com) and moderator of the MiddleWeb discussion listservs. John is a former education journalist and was the first executive director of the South Carolina Center for Teacher Recruitment (now CERRA-SC), where he helped create the national model Teacher Cadet program. From 1990-96, he served as vice president for information at the Atlanta-based Southern Regional Education Board. John is a freelance education writer and editor and is also moderator of the Teacher Leaders Network (www.teacherleaders.org) and editor of Working Toward Excellence, the journal of the Alabama Best Practices Center.
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Bill Ivey, a charter member of MiddleWeb, earned an A.B. degree in French from Middlebury College and an M.A.T. in French from the University of

Massachusetts at Amherst. He teaches ESL and rock band at Stoneleigh-Burnham School, independent all-girls high school in Western Massachusetts. Previously, he taught French and rock band to middle grades students at Pine Cobble School, an independent PK-9 day school. He is currently serving on a team to design and implement a middle school program for girls at Stoneleigh-Burnham.

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Beverly Maddox, also a charter MiddleWeb member, holds degrees from Arkansas State University and the University of Arkansas and teaches in a Little Rock middle school. After spending twelve years working with community action programs fighting the war against poverty, Beverly returned to teaching with a passion to work in schools serving poor and low-income children. Now, like her hero, she wages a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way in her language arts classroom.

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