

**The Spirit of Professional Learning:
A Story and a Metaphor
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The Story: Many years ago, as a new teacher, I was assigned to a classroom next door to a master teacher—my good fortune! Not only did she care about her students’ learning, but she cared about mine as well and was kind enough to take me under her wing. (Our school had no formal mentoring program, and did I ever need that wing!)

One “professional development day” (back when there used to be such things as professional development days for urban public school systems in the U.S.), we attended a workshop focused on a process for teaching writing. Almost from the presenter’s first words, I was put off: nothing he said seemed relevant for my students or for me. As the workshop wore on, my patience wore out, and by the end of the day, I could barely contain my frustration. As my mentor and I walked out together at the close of the session, I looked at her and rolled my eyes in that “can-you-believe-what-we-just-had-to-suffer-through” kind of way, fully expecting that she would roll her eyes right back at me in agreement. But she didn’t. Instead, she lifted one eyebrow and gave me a quizzical half smile as if to ask, “Is something wrong?”

I stopped in my tracks and stared at her, open-mouthed. “Aren’t you *furious* at how our time has just been *wasted*?” I burst out. “There was *nothing* in that workshop that we’ll be able to use—nothing that applies to our kids or our school. How can you not be at least *irritated*?” She grinned at me and shook her head. “Well, parts of it weren’t that great, that’s true,” she concurred. “But,” she continued with a note of obvious satisfaction in her voice, “I found that piece of driftwood I was looking for.”

Wait. Driftwood?

She went on to explain that what she loved to do outside of school, her avocation, was making art with things that she found on the beach. “Sometimes, I go to the beach and I know exactly what I’m looking for: sea glass of a certain color, shells of a particular shape or size. Sometimes, I see something that catches my eye, and I’ll pick it up and bring it home, even though I’m not sure at that moment what I’m going to do with it. But,” she said—and she leaned in to make sure I was following her—“*you never bring home the whole beach.*”

The Metaphor: Over the last 25 years, as I’ve attended conferences and workshops and courses both as a participant and as a presenter, I’ve returned to those words repeatedly. And over time, they’ve grown into an extended metaphor that, for me, captures the spirit of all the professional development experiences, both formal and informal, that all of us take part in as educators. The work we do with our students and our colleagues in our own classrooms, in our own schools—that work is our art.

No one can give us the recipe for how to make that art. Rather, we create it day in and day out, in response to the particular context and in collaboration with the particular individuals with whom we work.

No one can give us the recipe. However, the world is teeming with resources that we can draw on—selectively—as we create our art. Every workshop, lecture, course, book, professional conversation is a beach to be combed. We can never bring home the whole beach . . . but we can search in a thoughtful and committed way, sifting through each professional development experience in search of the one or two or handful of ideas, questions, strategies, and techniques that we can then artfully adapt in ways that speak most directly to our hopes, goals, questions, and needs and to those of our students.

As teachers and administrators, we are *not* consumers out shopping for that comprehensive program--perfect for us and our students in every way--that we can simply pull out of the box, set in motion (or “implement,” as some like to call it), and then watch our students’ learning soar. That program doesn’t exist (though there are lots of people out there with programs to sell who would like us to think it does).

In this online course (and in all of your other professional development experiences), let me invite you to be not consumers but creators; not adopters, but artists on a beachcombing expedition: Choose, adapt, re-shape, re-purpose whatever you find that you think might be useful. And don’t worry about the rest. Your first commitment is to your students and your colleagues and the integrity of that unique and collaborative art that you make together: the work of building a community in which the learning for everyone—students and teachers and administrators--is life-worthy and lasting.