



THE EDUCATIONAL
Forum

Learning from Organizations: Mobilizing and Sustaining Teacher Change

by Timothy Reynolds, Leslie D. Murrill,
and Gary L. Whitt

Abstract

Peter Senge's (1990) theory of organizational change includes teams that perceive the whole of the organization; grow professionally; navigate short- and long-term organizational experiences through exposed mental models; share a vision; and hear each voice in an ongoing communal learning process. The Margaret Sue Copenhaver Institute for Teaching and Learning is changing teacher education and professional development by employing Senge's model of learning organizations.

When you ask people what it is like being part of a great team, what is most striking is the meaningfulness of the experience. People talk about being part of something larger than themselves, of being connected, of being generative. It becomes quite clear that, for many, their experiences as part of truly great teams stand out as singular periods of life lived to the fullest. Some spend the rest of their lives looking for ways to recapture that spirit. (Senge 1990, 13)

So wrote Senge (1990) in his discussion of building a learning organization. Though written with the corporate community in mind, Senge's work has much to offer the field of education. Each school district, each building, and each classroom represents a team of individuals working together for the ultimate purpose of learning. Too often, however, poor working conditions such as low salaries, large class sizes, decreasing teacher autonomy, and governmental regulations and policies that penalize and demoralize educators undermine the potential for creating the great team. Countering these forces is crucial.

Reynolds, Murrill, and Whitt

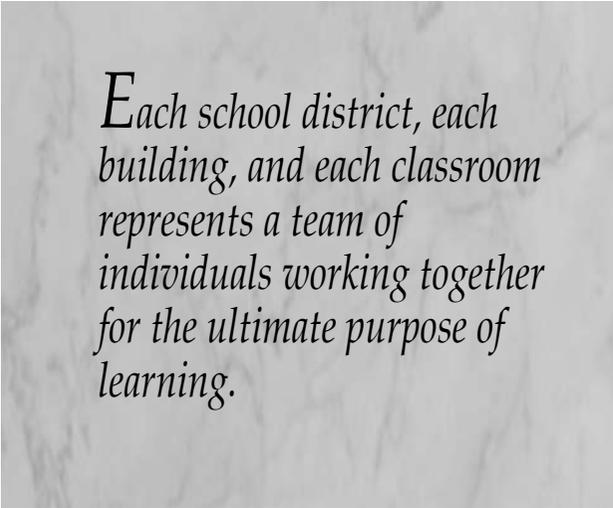
The Margaret Sue Copenhaver Institute for Teaching and Learning (MSCI) is actively countering these negative forces in education by making a difference in the classrooms of its participants. MSCI is an annual professional development program held each summer on the campus of Roanoke College, a nationally recognized liberal arts college in Virginia. The Institute is a three-day residential experience for K–12 teachers and administrators, administered by Roanoke College faculty, but designed and implemented by a steering committee comprised largely of practicing K–12 teachers and administrators. Moving from concept to pilot in just five years, the program is, today, eagerly attended by teachers from across the United States.

Much of the success of the Institute can be attributed to its commitment to cultivating the characteristics of a learning organization. According to Senge (1990), these traits include:

- systems thinking;
- personal mastery;
- mental models;
- building a shared vision; and
- team learning.

While Senge's tenets do not purport to change school budgets or government policies, they certainly pertain to bettering teacher working conditions and building great teams within schools. In the business management arena, Senge's (1990) strategy was a change model known as a learning organization. In the model, "people at all levels, individually and collectively, are continually increasing their capacity to produce results they really care about" (Karash 2002, 1). From this fundamental position, the MSCI faculty and steering committee work to maintain an organic, teacher-centered approach to professional development: a change mechanism that begins with the joint work of individuals at all

levels of education and encompasses the context of daily teaching. Simply stated, if teachers, administrators, and professors share their expertise and knowledge, change will result. This shared vision and work is known theoretically as systems thinking.



Each school district, each building, and each classroom represents a team of individuals working together for the ultimate purpose of learning.

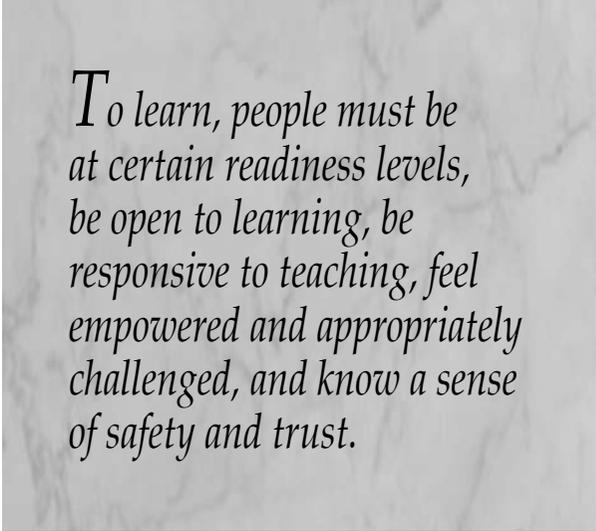
Systems Thinking

According to Senge (1990, 8), "Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static 'snapshots.'" In a K–16 school change model, college and university

professors are no longer the absolute authorities in the field. Rather, authority and expertise are shared with classroom practitioners and school administrators. The college or university faculty members present the knowledge base and help scaffold teachers' learning. The

practical knowledge and daily needs of teachers and administrators are perceived as equally relevant in the conversation of how to improve teaching and schooling. Through this approach, MSCI presents keynote addresses and theoretical information by leading authorities in pedagogy and sessions facilitated by classroom practitioners whose experiences and voices validate and elaborate presented theories. As a facilitator in a systems thinking model, the Institute must ensure conversation among team members.

In an era of government deficits, Roanoke College was required to seek resources beyond the public coffers to develop the Institute. Roanoke College faculty members acquired funds through an endowment by the James Hanes Memorial Fund in North Carolina. The Foundation's generous financial support provided the fiscal basis for the new Institute, while honoring the already taxed purses of teachers and school divisions. Not only does the endowment allow participants to attend MSCI's three-day residential program at a minimum cost (\$75.00), it also supports opportunities for teachers and administrators to gather from a variety of school districts, including rural, urban, public, and independent. As a result, teachers have the opportunity to network and collaborate with colleagues of similar and diverse backgrounds.



To learn, people must be at certain readiness levels, be open to learning, be responsive to teaching, feel empowered and appropriately challenged, and know a sense of safety and trust.

Securing financial resources and enlisting diverse voices is not the only way in which the college facilitates the program. Roanoke College also is charged with building a shared vision between schools and practitioners in this systemic approach to professional development. To facilitate this vision, MSCI grounds its intellectual framework in constructivism—a foundation well-suited to meeting teacher needs and interests. From its formative stages, MSCI has been advised by a steering committee of classroom teachers and school administrators. These men and women from elementary and secondary schools represent both public and independent schools in rural and urban areas. The diverse membership presents a mosaic of school and practitioner needs, and gives voice to teachers looking for assistance and direction. Participants leave the Institute with a sense that it is a wonderful place to stretch the mind, meet new friends, and confirm and affirm what teachers do. Participants begin to perceive the interrelationships that exist in personnel, curriculum, and programs across K–16 education.

The Institute's vision is shared by committee members, as well as by a growing number of former participants. Many of the early participants are now part of a pool of speakers who will serve future Institutes. Many veteran participants have urged the Institute to create new opportunities for cohorts of former participants to continue their

Reynolds, Murrill, and Whitt

professional development. Both public and independent schools are pooling portions of their professional development dollars to guarantee this new systemic effort to strengthen their teachers' classroom practices.

Personal Mastery

In his groundbreaking work on how corporations grow and recognize new opportunities, Senge (1990, 139) observed that "organizations learn only through individuals who learn." Such a statement may seem trite, but when considered carefully, it has enormous implications for school communities.

Years of pedagogical research revealed the complexity of the learning process. To learn, people must be at certain readiness levels, be open to learning, be responsive to teaching, feel empowered and appropriately challenged, and know a sense of safety and trust. In the one-stop, in-service model, these learner needs often are ignored and the teacher remains passive. In after-school sessions or on in-service days, classroom practitioners receive ideas and materials from experts outside of daily classroom routines and experience, while the teachers' own expertise—often vastly superior to that of the experts—is left untapped and unsolicited. In MSCI's practitioner-centered model, teachers are engaged actively in the learning process, and the environment is structured to encourage personal mastery.

This sense of personal mastery is nurtured at MSCI by making attendance voluntary rather than required by a school system. As Senge (1990, 172) reminded us, "Embarking on any path of personal growth is a matter of choice. No one can be forced to develop his or her personal mastery. It is guaranteed to backfire." As a result, teacher enrollment in MSCI reflects a personal interest or concern about individual professional growth. This teacher empowerment approach encourages an intrinsic motivation to learn, which aligns with current beliefs about the power of intrinsic motivation to stimulate learner engagement (Guthrie and Alvermann 1999).

Upon acceptance to the Institute, participants immediately begin preparing for their learning experience. Before arriving, they are given a text written by the Institute's upcoming keynote speaker. By reading the text and journaling their thoughts, participants gain background knowledge on the upcoming topic. At the Institute, breakout sessions address particulars of a theme and are presented by peer experts. Most breakout sessions emphasize the current year's topic or theme, but the previous year's topic also is revisited. In these sessions, veteran participants share how they have implemented successfully the previous year's learning in their teaching.

At the conclusion of MSCI 2000, two participants collaborated to implement Concept Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI), an instructional model presented by keynote speaker John Guthrie. The participants prepared and used several CORI units during the 2000–2001 school year, integrating reading and writing within their third-grade science curriculum. As the year progressed, college faculty members were informed of their efforts. At MSCI 2001, these two previous participants were invited to share their professional development. Their breakout session was titled "Chicken Soup for Inquiring CORI Minds." To illustrate their success, they asked a third-grade student to share her CORI projects with

the audience. Their team effort included not only an oral discussion of CORI, but also demonstrated—through the use of literature, visual aids, song, and student work—how CORI was actualized in their classrooms. It was pointed out that the philosophy behind the CORI model involved beginning each unit with student questions rather than teacher directives, thereby making student interests and inquiry the starting points for learning activities. These teachers facilitated student research via several strategies. First, they provided classroom resources from which students might search and retrieve information. Second, the teachers taught strategies to support comprehension and integration of ideas and, third, they provided a range of possibilities through which students might communicate new learning in oral, visual, and written forms.

The presentation demonstrated an effective teaching model, and illustrated that the two teachers' participation in MSCI 2000 was not a waste of time and resources. They were able to use what they learned about engaged reading in their classroom practices and made a difference in their students' learning. The teachers experienced a level of personal mastery which translated into student learning.

The last day of MSCI is structured to help teachers assimilate information and build a full understanding of the presented theme to encourage participants to transfer their learning. Sessions allow participants to work together or individually, and use their newly acquired knowledge to enhance and expand their classroom curriculum and personal instructional practice. At the end of the Institute, participants are actively engaged in constructing a larger, personal understanding of teaching and learning.

Mental Models

Through the use of mental models as navigational tools, people maneuver and operate in their daily lives. These mental models are "deeply held internal images of how the world works" (Senge 1990, 174). They allow individuals to engage in normal activity without continuously having to assimilate and accommodate information. However, because they are sometimes inaccurate or antiquated, the models can limit a person's willingness or ability to change. This happens when "the models are tacit—when they exist below the level of awareness" (Senge 1990, 176). To counteract this phenomenon, professional development efforts must provide teachers with consistent, accurate images and assumptions in classroom practice.

MSCI structures its mental model in the tenets of constructivism, a philosophical framework of thinking that situates learning in social practice or in a community of relationships forging new and expanded understandings. Learners do not act alone in constructing new knowledge; instead, learning is embedded in language and social context and within interactions that learners have with one another (Lave and Wenger 1991). Vygotsky (1986) described constructivist learning as first occurring interpersonally and then intrapersonally. Constructivism proposes that before an individual encounters new learning internally, he or she encounters it within a social context.

The constructivist underpinnings are actualized each year at the Institute. The annual theme or topic is based on its consistency and adherence to the academic principles

Reynolds, Murrill, and Whitt

governing constructivism, resulting in a program that builds on the previous year's learning. For example, the 2001 Institute featured Dr. Carol Tomlinson, a leading expert in differentiated instruction, whose work presents a model that values student-centered and activity-based instruction. Dr. Tomlinson's philosophical and theoretical bearings adhere to the tenets of constructivism. Likewise, the works of Dr. Howard Gardner (the 2003 keynote speaker), Dr. Kathleen Short and Dr. Richard Beach (the 2002 keynote speakers), and Dr. John Guthrie and Dr. Donna Alvermann (the 2000 keynote speakers) align with that position.

By grounding each year's theme in constructivism, MSCI continuously encourages participants to examine their beliefs and understandings about teaching and learning. This allows teachers to examine previously held assumptions through a consistent theoretical lens and avoid riding bandwagons of trendy methods or ideas. Instead, they have the opportunity to build continuously on their understanding of student-centered instruction by working with colleagues and experts who have similar mental models of classroom instruction. One participant described the learning as providing "a new framework for teaching." The continuity in the curriculum led another participant to believe that the Institute is "building a cohort of teachers who work at improving their instruction." Hence, these teachers want to return each year to continue a consistent pattern of professional development.

Building a Shared Vision

MSCI's beginnings go back to the fall of 1998, when Roanoke College education faculty members learned of a possible endowment for funding a professional development Institute. Faculty members invited 40 area teachers and administrators to work together on two goals:

- Determine whether such an Institute would be perceived as beneficial to the local community of educators.
- If interest was expressed, identify a committee of individuals to serve as a steering group that would guide and assist in writing a funding proposal.

Positive interest was indicated and a steering committee of local educators was formed. This committee, along with two college faculty members, met over a six-month period during which a shared vision of MSCI began to emerge.

The collaborative leadership of committee and college faculty members has been crucial to the growth of MSCI and its unfolding vision. Senge (1990, 9) wrote, "The practice of shared vision involves the skills of unearthing shared 'pictures of the future' that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance." Committee and college faculty members worked together to create a funding proposal, determine keynote themes and speakers, and design a schedule for the Institute. As a result of their collaboration, the group benefited from the sense of community that emerged, and agreed that learning occurs best when students actively engage in a subject. These common beliefs in community and socially situated learning were instrumental in helping MSCI identify the constructivist intellectual framework that now governs the Institute's direction and ensures that each year's theme builds on the work of the previous year. The Institute's

course of study focuses on opportunities for teachers to explore how to construct active, learner-centered classrooms—the shared vision of the Institute’s steering committee and veteran participants.

The MSCI steering committee is now a group of 16 educators, who represent six local school divisions, an independent school, and a neighboring university. The committee continues to provide direction for each year’s Institute by identifying the current needs and interests of classroom practitioners. By identifying where teachers need assistance and direction, committee and college faculty members annually determine a common area of professional interest among teachers. Once speakers, events, and other logistical arrangements have been confirmed, brochures are mailed to prospective participants. Due to their shared interests, participants confidently engage one another in conversations about the theoretical implications and innovations in classroom practice suggested by the Institute’s theme. More than one participant has expressed the view that “there is nothing better than being able to talk with educators” and being able to “compare notes and establish links.”

Team Learning

Good teaching and job satisfaction are connected inextricably with satisfying relationships and a sense of community (Williams 2003). Though teachers’ anecdotes consistently reinforced this perception, hard data underscores the importance of community among teachers. In the mid-1990s, the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (1996, 63) explained that “regular time for collegial work and planning” encourages teacher growth. Senge’s (1990, 236) research in human management and innovation described the success of team learning as the ability for participants to “think insightfully about complex issues. Here, teams must learn how to tap the potential for many minds to be more intelligent than one mind.”

MSCI structures team learning by building a learning community among participants. The Institute seeks ways to help overextended teachers feel comfortable, appreciated, and engaged, such as providing ample space and time for learning. Effective teachers know that a comfortable learning environment encourages careful reflection and thorough study. In MSCI’s three-day schedule, blocks of time are planned strategically for teachers to engage in formal and informal conversations with one another, session presenters, and keynote speakers. The conversations occur during small group sessions, whole group sessions, social gatherings, and extended lunch and dinner hours. To ensure collegial, free-flowing conversations, Institute participation is limited to 100 people, so that participants can interact more frequently and share their experiences and knowledge more readily. The result is a collegial, community experience according to one participant:

The Institute far exceeded my expectations! In addition to meeting my ‘academic’ needs, it also met a need that I didn’t even know I had—one for more talking and sharing with other educators! It was wonderful just to have the time to sit and talk, share, and laugh together. Sometimes we just don’t laugh enough! Thanks for giving me that opportunity. I will go home refreshed and enthused! I want to come back!

Reynolds, Murrill, and Whitt

For many participants, the MSCI program is one of the few times that professional development does not occur after a long school day or within the hurriedness of a teacher workday. When they are free to work in an environment outside of their schools, teachers are not distracted by the demands of their regular duties and daily responsibilities. Instead, teachers are encouraged to work in decompressed blocks of time which allow them to focus their energies, concentrate on learning, and master new material. The Institute also recognizes personal and family obligations by not requiring an extended absence or infringing on regularly scheduled activities. The off-school site gathering affords teachers opportunities to share thoughts and learning with colleagues from other disciplines and school divisions, without adding to the responsibilities of the normal workday. Pleasant meals and social gatherings also create an atmosphere of professional work and respect—an environment typical of personnel development meetings in professions outside of teaching. At MSCI, teachers receive and respond to professional treatment, an apparently rare courtesy extended them during the regular school year. After MSCI, a teacher noted, “I was treated as if I am important and what I do is important.” As indicated by the participant’s surprise, such professional treatment is infrequent, if not totally absent, during the normal school year. Such a revelation is discouraging considering the importance of teacher mastery learning to education reform.

The sense of collegial community noted by many past MSCI participants establishes the foundation for team learning that goes beyond surface acknowledgment of educational issues. As groups of MSCI participants continue to converse and work together during and after the Institute, they grapple with harder issues, such as how to actualize theory amidst the challenges of classroom life and the regulations imposed upon them. Many veterans of MSCI return year after year to reconnect with colleagues. Others form networks with whom they communicate regularly. Some implement new classroom strategies and collaboratively write about and present their work in scholarly settings. The challenges they face during daily classroom life add authenticity to their learning. Senge wrote (1990, 249), “In great teams, conflict becomes productive . . . [it] becomes, in effect, part of the ongoing dialogue.” In this sense, the difficult working conditions that teachers face become essential considerations in their learning conversations.

Results

Educators must be afforded the opportunity to assimilate, grow, change, and, most importantly, share their knowledge with others. To be successful, educators need to feel that they are on the team, and that they are an integral part of the team. By giving them voice, giving them power of control, and creating an environment which welcomes their opinions and understanding of their practice, MSCI has created a different kind of teacher training environment. Educators rarely value attempts to expand their knowledge of the educational arena, because their experience, knowledge, and peers typically are ignored. MSCI, through the application of Senge’s traits of a learning organization, has created a valued space for educator growth. Participants’ comments about the Institute include:

MSCI is always a highlight of my summer. Thanks for all the hard work to give us such a great Institute!

Sharing with other educators! It is always beneficial to share with people who do what

you do! I'm always encouraged when I'm here.

Great experience! I will encourage others to attend.

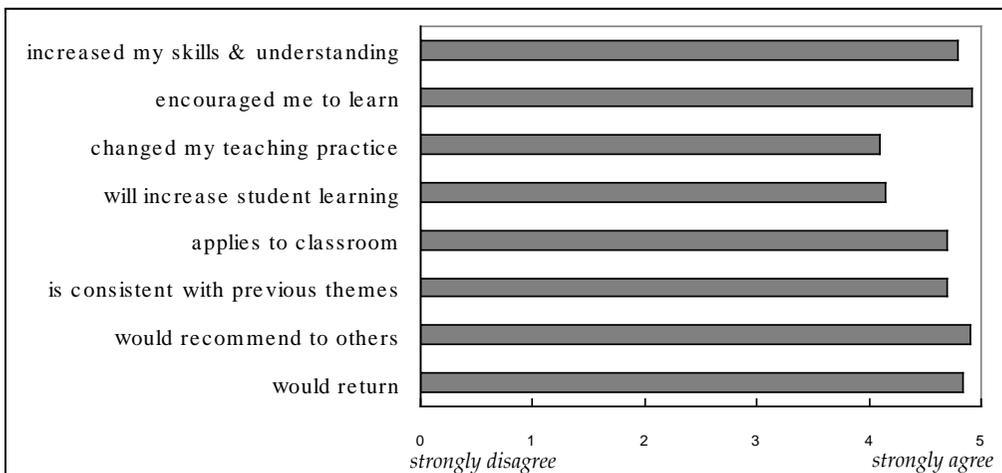
Thank you for the opportunity to participate! My classroom will be enriched—I should say my students will be enriched because of this experience.

The professionalism displayed was awesome! I loved the 'residential' aspect because it gave me a chance to interact with other educators.

I now feel more at ease using SOLs [Virginia Standards of Learning] as a backbone and not a vice. I received a wealth of ideas, theory, and understanding about differentiation and loving the kid!

Using a Likert scale, 42 veteran Institute participants who attended MSCI 2003 agreed strongly that the Institute encouraged them to learn, was consistent with previous Institute themes, furthered their skills and understanding of teaching, was applicable to their classrooms, caused greater student learning, and changed their teaching practices noticeably; and that they would attend again and encourage colleagues to do so (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Veteran Institute Participants' Comments



Many familiar with professional training for teachers would regard these numbers as atypical. The participants obviously valued the Institute and were changed and encouraged by it. Repeatedly, the participants expressed their surprise at the value placed by the Institute on their experience, skill and knowledge, and collective wisdom. In effect, educators, many for the first time, were given the feeling that they are not only on the team, but form a critical and valued part of the learning team. This buy-in is not only helpful in creating a sense of team and shared experience, but also is essential to perceived validity and value of proposed learning and change. A team without it will fail.

Conclusion

The MSCI faculty, steering committee, and veteran participants fully recognize that today's professional development must meet the public demand for increased efficiency and effectiveness. In an age of increased accountability, the Institute is committed to helping

Reynolds, Murrill, and Whitt

teachers develop the capacity to meet the new rigors of academic standards. To achieve this goal, MSCI is committed to building learning communities by developing great teams of educators within the political and economic realities of contemporary American schooling. To that end, Institute members and participants have given themselves to mastering the art and practice of living and working in a learning organization. The framework for such an organization comes from leadership theories and the long-term success of change initiatives in America's thriving companies and organizations. To approach professional development from a managerial framework or business model, the Institute's leadership intentionally has uncovered its tacitly held images of teaching and learning, and embraced the characteristics of organizations that transfer knowledge among their members. The achievement of these goals can be accredited to three Institute design features.

- **Demographics**—Participation numbers are kept at a size that allows teachers to network and know one another beyond simple greetings. As a result, team learning and systems thinking become possible.
- **Schedule**—The Institute is scheduled over an extended, yet comfortable, time period (three days). This focused time encourages teachers to genuinely explore new ideas and practices in a comfortable environment. Through intensive study, new skills are mastered and teachers and administrators' knowledge base is expanded, aiding understanding of their responsibilities in instructional leadership. In other words, personal mastery of learning occurs.
- **Personal and Communal**—The Institute is constructed and advertised as an individual and collective means of achieving quality in classroom practices. The sense of individual accountability and communal support leads to "results [that] . . . members truly desire" (Senge 1990, 236). The improvements in teacher learning come from their own experiences, the experiences of others, and a willingness to try new approaches to teaching and learning. The outcome is a professional development program where teachers are intimately involved in the decision-making processes related to the development of their instructional practices. This firsthand involvement encourages the development of a mental model built on a shared vision.

This approach to teacher learning is not a quick fix. Rather, the approach is rooted firmly in change theory and data that crosses the disciplines. By using a learning organization model, teacher professional development efforts can recognize the systemic nature of change, the essential requirement of personal mastery, the merit of a common and consistent mental model, the value of shared vision, and the importance of team learning. In turn, the focus on these elements of change encourages a momentum in teacher learning and supports the development of highly qualified teams of educators who are connected to a generative and meaningful learning experience.

References

- Guthrie, J. T., and D. E. Alvermann, eds. 1999. *Engaged reading: Processes, practices, and policy implications*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Karash, R. 2002. What is a 'learning organization'? Cambridge, MA: Learning-Org Dialog on Learning Organizations. Available at: <http://world.std.com/~lo/>.
- Lave, J., and E. Wenger. 1991. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. 1996. *What matters most: Teaching for America's future*. New York: NCTAF.

Senge, P. M. 1990. *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York: Doubleday.

Vygotsky, L. S. 1986. *Thought and language*, ed. and trans. A. Kozulin. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Williams, J. S. 2003. Why great teachers stay. *Educational Leadership* 60(8): 71-76.



Timothy Reynolds is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Education at Roanoke College. He also is the codirector of the Copenhaver Institute for Teaching and Learning. He has taught in the U.S. Department of Defense Dependents' Schools and in Virginia public schools.

Leslie D. Murrill is an Associate Professor of Education at Roanoke College and codirector of the Copenhaver Institute for Teaching and Learning. She has taught in public and independent schools in Indiana and Maryland.



Gary L. Whitt, a veteran secondary teacher turned Instructional Technologist, works with preservice teachers at Roanoke College where he researches the effects of assessment modalities on long-term memory and the effects of Senge-type structures on professional development in teachers.

