

ESCAPE FROM Teacher ISLAND

Building Colleague Relationships
Through MTC Participation

by JESSA BARNIOL

to paraphrase John Donne, no teacher is an island. But sometimes, after a long day in the classroom, or a long night grading, or even a few hours into a particularly hectic Monday, it can definitely feel like it.

One of the best things about any Math Teachers' Circle is that it closes the distance between teachers. It is a chance for teachers to broaden their own personal circles, to meet other teachers and exchange ideas. The majority of teachers who attend MTCs come alone, as the sole representative of their department or school. But some teachers, and sometimes entire departments, participate in their local MTCs as a unit. And for these teachers, sometimes even the colleagues already closest to them become closer.

Patty Hill and Michael Word, teachers together at Kealing Middle School in Austin, Texas, were a part of the original team that launched the Mathematics Teachers' Circle of Austin. They had been eating

lunch together with fellow Kealing teachers Nannette Strickland, Brittany Huerta and Roscoe "Mac" McCormick for several years, and in between the usual breaktime chatter they would sometimes pull out a math problem or a question that had arisen in a class or math team meeting and chip away at it together. So the MTC, basically a formalization of this already existing interaction, naturally appealed to them.

Meanwhile, when the Philadelphia Area Math Teachers' Circle in Pennsylvania found a home for meetings at The Philadelphia School, where Steve Bartholomew and Missy Lincoln Tal were teaching, the two teachers decided to go check it out together. They were later joined by their colleague, Abby Gordon. Lincoln Tal loved attending the Circle so much that, even while very pregnant, she made time in her busy schedule to return to meetings of the Circle with Bartholomew.

Then, at Cope Middle School in Bossier City, Louisiana, teachers Lisa Pumphrey and Jacob Hesselschwardt were invited to a meeting of the North Louisiana Math Teachers' Circle by their middle school's math supervisor, a founder of the Circle. They continue to participate in MTC meetings together to this day, and often brainstorm ways to adapt MTC problems to their respective classrooms.

"I think that having familiar faces there, other teachers from your own school, enhances the MTC experience," Hesselschwardt said. "It encourages you to be an active participant. You are already a little more comfortable, and you are already aware of each others' positive strengths. So you can encourage and help one another. It makes it impossible to be a wallflower."

Attending a Circle together might also help teachers to see their own colleagues in a different light.

"You might have one person who's really intuitive, someone else who is incredibly organized, and perhaps a brainstormer with revolutionary, out-of-the-box ideas," Steve Bartholomew said. "You might never get to see that side of them in staff meetings or the lunch room. But as soon as you start working together on a common problem, you realize how much you can learn from one another."

From her prior friendship with her own fellow teachers, Patty Hill demonstrates how this enhanced knowledge of your colleagues can be helpful as a teaching resource.

"Michael [Word] is the geometry whiz in our department," Hill said. "My students know that whenever they stump me in a geometry question, I'm going right across the hall to ask him for input."

Lisa Pumphrey acknowledges that many middle school teachers can feel like fish out of water, particularly in their first few years teaching.

"I may have an elementary teaching background, and someone else may have a high school teaching background," Pumphrey said. "It is entirely possible, and even probable, to be an eighth grade math teacher who was not a math major. Learning to collaborate with other teachers, particularly with your own coworkers, helps you through that. The MTC

Reel 'em in

Here, the teachers offer their best advice for getting groups of colleagues interested in attending an MTC together in the first place.

"Hold an MTC session at your school. Either your school can host a general regular meeting of your MTC, or you can have one of your MTC contacts come to your school to lead a session as a part of an in-service professional development day. It's hard for teachers to say no when the MTC comes to you the first time, especially if food is involved. We held a few mini-MTC sessions at our school to test the waters before launching the MTC, and I think that is a large part of why so many of our teachers are so invested in the Circle." – **Patty Hill**

"Just get people to go once. When they see how great the meetings are, and how much value they add to the classroom, they will be hooked."

– **Jacob Hesselschwardt**

"It takes a certain type of teacher to be interested in Math Teachers' Circles. Find like-minded teachers and get them on board. Find the people who would actually be most interested and invite those people." – **Michael Word**

"Have your school's math chair or someone else in authority encourage your department to go together. Even a gentle nudge from a higher-up is sometimes all the encouragement some people need." – **Steve Bartholomew**

"Just start small. Bring one colleague along, then another. Build one-on-one relationships with your colleagues, both at school and in the Circle. Then introduce your new friends to each other. People will be more likely to attend and keep attending if they are excited about seeing their friends."

– **Nannette Strickland**

FEATURED TEACHERS

can help connect you with someone to show you the ropes. Even better, it can help you forge a connection with someone from your own workplace.”

However, there can also be downsides to attending the MTC together with teachers from your own school. Nannette Strickland said that often coworkers have such a similar frame of reference that, even as a collective group, they have much to learn from an outsider. She maintained that it is important to be mindful to use your fellow teachers as constructive team members and not as a safety net or a wall to keep you inside your comfort zone.

“At one of our earliest MTC meetings, which was all teachers from our own school, we were working together on a problem with a hypothetical line of lockers,” Nannette Strickland said. “We were to open every second locker, then open or close every third locker, and so on, and figure how to find how many lockers were open at any given time. We were having a hard time finding a way to represent the problem mathematically, when a 6th grade special education teacher from our school, a person outside our usual frame of reference, recommended we use a set of manipulatives and simply flip them over each time the locker was ‘opened’ or ‘closed,’ so we could start by getting a good visual representation of the problem. Her students responded best to that type of learning, but we were all, collectively, so far removed from that style that we had failed to even consider it. Sometimes it takes working with different people to remember that there are other ways of doing things.”

Even though many of the teachers were already good friends and close colleagues before attending their local MTCs together, they mentioned that the change of scenery improved their interactions and collaborations.

“Our math department was already meeting once a week, but the MTC just gave us something new to talk about,” Steve Bartholomew said. “It injected new life into our interactions.”

Jacob Hesselschwardt insists that this benefit will occur whether or not other teachers from the same school are able to attend together.

“It is really helpful to have this one evening a month where you change your scenery and perspective, whether it’s just you as an individual teacher, or a number of teachers from your department,” Hesselschwardt said. “If you put yourself in a new situation, you will learn something. If you put your existing group within a larger group, you will learn something. You will learn what works and what doesn’t.”

Either way, participating in a Circle can help teachers broaden their perspective, become better collaborators, and, yes, even get off the proverbial island.

“We are all math nerds at heart,” Patty Hill said. “When you’ve been teaching the same class for 15 years, and you’re facing the teach-to-the-test focus that you find at basically every school nowadays, you lose touch with your inner mathematician. You might need to be reminded why you love it. Working with great colleagues and participating in the MTC both accomplish this. But if you have both, it’s even better.”



Left, Nannette Strickland (fourth from right) and Roscoe “Mac” McCormick (second from right) of Kealing Middle School and the MTC of Austin explore the geometry of the card game Set with a physical model. Right, Strickland (far left) and McCormick (upper right) use a more traditional pencil-and-paper approach to new MTC topics.