

Finding Exponential Hope in Courageous Communities

THE DIVERGENT RESEARCH TEAM

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“Hope can be a powerful force. Maybe there’s no actual magic in it, but when you know what you hope for most and hold it like a light within you, you can make things happen, almost like magic.”

—from *Daughter of Smoke and Bone* by Laini Taylor

It's perhaps the understatement of the century: things in education are rough right now. The educational landscape has shifted in ways that are making our jobs harder, more frustrating, and, frankly, less rewarding than they ever should be. We didn't sign up for this never-ending tug of war among politics, political grandstanders, and pedagogical shifting, but here we are—and it's not pretty.

It feels like every day there's a new battle to fight. From underfunded classrooms to absurdly high expectations, from ever-shifting standards written by entities who have political agendas to unwarranted public scrutiny . . . we are under attack no matter what we do—it's exhausting. The truth is, the system is broken in many places, and it's wearing all of us down.

To be a teacher today means to be courageous in ways we couldn't have fathomed even thirty years ago. And to be courageous, one must find their community of support to draw strength from on the hardest of days. Hope must be cultivated. How do we find the community of support we need to navigate the current times? For us, we've found one another.

A *courageous community* refers to a group of individuals who come together with a shared commitment to truth, justice, and compassion, even in the face of adversity, discomfort, or conflict. These communities value open dialogue, accountability, and collective growth. They actively work to address difficult issues, including social injustices, inequity, and personal differences, rather than avoiding or suppressing them.

Members of a courageous community are willing to ask critical questions and engage in difficult conversations, even when these discussions

are uncomfortable or challenging. They promote transparency and honesty while recognizing the importance of empathy and active listening. Courageous communities actively work to create spaces that are equitable and inclusive. They address issues of marginalization, systemic oppression, and discrimination, ensuring that all voices—especially those that are often silenced—are heard and respected.

Our courageous community began as a result of our involvement with the Initiative for Literacy in a Digital Age (<http://www.initiativefor21research.org/>). We are individuals dedicated to teacher excellence who have strong ties to the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Writing Project. We are also scholars who share our humanity in support of one another, so we can be stronger for the other communities we inhabit. Like family, we share, we question, we support, and, perhaps most importantly, we argue. Yet, we do so with a shared hope and understanding that we need to do better for the young people in our schools. This takes courage.

In a courageous community, there is a sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of all members. The community works together to support one another, acknowledging both individual and collective challenges, while remaining committed to finding solutions as a group. Listening is central, as is questioning. Individualism remains central, but being part of a collective helps members to grow stronger as a team. With that in mind, we each share in what follows how we have each found community in our work.

Finding Community in Response Groups

In my work as a writing project director I (Chris) started participating in response groups and, without hyperbole, they've changed my life. As a teacher I had tried many peer response and peer feedback groups and participated as a writer in many as well. Mostly, these were moderately successful at best, and a complete trainwreck on the usual. But peer response groups, as I found them when I arrived in Fayetteville in 2007 at the

Northwest Arkansas Writing Project, were transcendent and transformational, both to writing and writers.

The process is simple. Each writer reads their piece aloud while the responders listen, note feedback on a form, and then take turns providing feedback to the writer, starting with what they liked, moving to what questions occurred to them, and finally ending with suggestions or ideas for possible change. This positions the writer as the person in charge of their writing—no one is marking on their draft or taking away agency from the author to make decisions about what, if any, advice to take from their peers.

After experiencing this in classrooms and in writing workshops as a facilitator, teacher, writer, and responder, I decided to airlift this strategy to my hobby as a singer-songwriter. In 2016, I formed the Songs in Progress (SIP) and Sing groups, which invite community members from the area to meet once per month, present a song, and provide feedback to other songwriters. If there's anything magical about it, it's the fact that each of us has a deadline every month to present progress on a song, which has resulted in many more completed drafts of songs.

Why it works for me and why many members share they keep coming back nine years in is the fact that we are an honest and supportive community. I'm famous for showing up with a song that's half baked (or less), something I'd finished mere minutes before the event was set to begin, and then continuing to work on and craft the song over several months, bringing it back when progress is made. SIP and Sing participants often bring a snack or drink to share and are greeted with hugs. During COVID, we moved online and kept writing and checking in on one another. Perhaps my favorite monthly meeting so far was when we came back in person after the pandemic.

Recently, the SIP and Sing became a ticketed event at the Folk School of Fayetteville where a mostly different set of songwriters gather on the first Friday of each month to keep moving songs forward. From novice hobbyists to touring professionals, the response groups model keeps working, keeps providing lyrical insights, and keeps us listening to one another. More than anything, we keep learning and writing and sharing together. And that makes all the difference.

Chris Goering, Arkansas

Bravery in Action

Recently, students and I (Bryan) revisited Chris Crutcher's "A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune," in which the stepfather tells his stepson how Superman is not brave. Superman is indestructible, so what is his need for bravery?

"It's guys like you and me that are brave, Angus," the stepfather says. "Guys who are different and can be crushed—and know it—but go out there anyways." (*Athletic Shorts*, 1991, p. 18)

A courageous community is one that embraces its own bravery. It seeks a common, shared humanity between all of its members and recognizes that individuals who operate independently can grow stronger when part of a collective. I began my career in a K-12 public school with a mission for diversity, self-directed learning, and civic engagement. We were a member of the Coalition of Essential Schools, and we believed in the power of being coaches in our classrooms, that high standards are meant to be applied to all students, and that decency and trust go a long way in building relationships. A courageous community upholds democracy and equity as central to the larger community—it's *who we are together* (Crandall, 2019).

I've spent the majority of my career participating in Critical Friends Groups (Silva, 2003) where members challenge one another to improve teaching practices and to hone leadership skills. The aim is to keep one another honest with the profession, to uphold integrity, and to provide safe, constructive spaces to discuss the pressures of the profession honestly. A colleague recently pointed out to me, however, that our conversations aren't just critical, they're courageous. We're human beings who occupy classrooms and are assigned to empty the ocean as fast as we can with a fork. The work isn't only critical to the times we live in but requires tremendous bravery.

During the COVID years, I was fortunate to participate in a number of online communities that helped me to understand sudden shifts in teaching and learning expectations as well as coping mechanisms we needed to process societal unrest. It required courage and bravery to take part in such communities, because we were operating in uncharted territories; we stepped out there anyway and found joy and rejuvenation in

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one another (Crandall & Early, 2023) by providing support, writing, and thinking together. We admitted our vulnerabilities and congregated in communities to make sense of the chaos. In retrospect, we were being courageous for one another, doing the best we could against crushing times. All of us were vulnerable, and our bravery is what helped us to grow stronger.

Bryan Ripley Crandall, Connecticut

Balancing Change with Mental Health

As an educator, researcher, and, most importantly, a parent and partner, I (Ian) believe in the power of creating a courageous community—a space where we don't just talk about change but actively pursue it. In these communities, we show up, speak out, and strive to create real, tangible improvements for the benefit of all, whether through social activism, advocacy, or everyday acts of kindness and solidarity. But being a part of this work also means balancing the need for change with valuing mental health, checking my own privilege and perspective, and striving for better while staying grounded.

Valuing Mental Health

I'm learning that I can't do this work if I don't take care of myself first. Setting boundaries and making time for self-care are essential for me to show up as the best version of myself. Whether it's practicing mindfulness, taking breaks, or leaning on a support system, I try to prioritize my mental health, because if I'm not well, I can't be effective for my students or my community. At the same time, I'm mindful of the emotional needs of those around me. I regularly check in with students and colleagues, fostering a space where everyone's well-being is a priority.

Checking My Privilege and Perspective

Being a part of a courageous community means I have to constantly check my own privilege. I engage in regular self-reflection, asking myself how my background, my identity, and my own biases influence the way I teach and interact with others. Listening to the voices of marginalized students, parents, and colleagues is essential, as it helps me widen my perspective and recognize systemic barriers that I might otherwise overlook. I know I won't always get it right, and that's why I remain open to critique. Courageous communities aren't about perfection, they're about growth.

Speaking Out for Justice and Equity

In my classroom, I don't just talk about equity, I work to make it a reality. Whether I'm adjusting my curriculum to include more diverse voices, advocating for fairer policies, or standing up for students who face discrimination, I try to use my role as an educator to address inequities head-on. Courageous communities work for tangible change, and I strive to use inclusive teaching practices that reflect this. Beyond the classroom, I get involved in the larger school community, pushing for policies that support all students, especially those who have been historically marginalized.

Striving for Better while Staying Balanced

I've learned that real change is a team effort. Collaborating with like-minded educators and building networks of support is crucial not only for making a difference but also for keeping myself balanced in this work. Practicing many of the things that we've described in this piece will not make you the most popular person in some communities or at cocktail parties. Celebrating small victories along the way helps me stay motivated and avoid burnout. I also make it a priority to continually learn, seeking out professional development opportunities that deepen my understanding of social justice, equity, and mental health. This ongoing learning is key to being the best advocate I can be.

Ian O'Byrne, South Carolina

Finding Communities That Challenge Us

Courageous communities embrace a growth mindset, understanding that individuals and the community as a whole can evolve over time. Members are open to feedback and are willing to confront their own biases or mistakes in order to foster learning and improvement. As white, cisgender female teachers and teacher educators, we've (Shelbie and Jen) found that engaging in meaningful conversations about critical education topics—particularly those related to race, inequality, injustice, and other challenging truths—has been essential in deepening our understanding of the world and our role within it. To be effective allies and advocates for our students and classrooms, especially in spaces where difficult conversations are often avoided, we have come to rely on our professional communities as vital to our reflective processes.

We've each found these supportive, courageous communities in organizations such as the National

Writing Project and its affiliated university sites, the National Council of Teachers of English and its state affiliates, English Language Arts Teacher Educators, and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and its state affiliates. These communities are committed to fostering safe spaces for learning and growth, promoting a culture of respect, and encouraging diverse perspectives and experiences.

However, simply being members of these communities is not enough. For us, it requires actively acknowledging what we don't know. Transparency and openness about our own challenges are key in these shared spaces. While we cannot fully understand from personal experience how marginalized students feel, for example, or grasp the full impact of underrepresented perspectives, we can intentionally recognize and outwardly identify our gaps in knowledge. Saying "I don't know" can be incredibly uncomfortable, especially when society expects the teacher to know everything.

We commit to embracing opportunities for growth, seeking out the knowledge we need to improve upon, and gratefully learning alongside those willing to share their experiences with us. A truly courageous community moves beyond awareness to action, working together to advocate for policy changes, support social justice initiatives, and hold institutions accountable. We must be brave enough to confront difficult truths, even within

ourselves, and commit to working toward a more just and compassionate society.

Shelbie Witte, North Dakota, and Jennifer Dail, Tennessee

Our collective is stronger because we find ways to support and be supported by multiple communities. Within and because of them, we find exponential hope to continue this work, confronting the challenges we face as educators. How lucky are we.

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The Divergent Research Team, pictured at ElevatED 2023 in Nashville, TN. Pictured (L to R) are Dr. Bryan Ripley Crandall, Fairfield University; Dr. Ian O'Byrne, College of Charleston; Dr. Shelbie Witte, University of North Dakota; Dr. Jennifer Dail, Kennesaw State University; and Dr. Christian Z. Goering, University of Arkansas. Not pictured are Dr. Detra Price-Dennis, The Ohio State University, and Dr. Raúl Alberto Mora, Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana.