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SEEING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH TEACHERS' EYES: A CLOSER LOOK AT A SITE OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

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Old workshop delivery models for teachers are giving way to vibrant ongoing professional learning communities where teachers generate, as well as gain, knowledge. The National Writing Project, arguably the most successful teacher network in the United States, offers a model of how to foster learning communities of teachers.

— From “Redesigning Professional Development,” in *The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution*, 2003 (National Commission on Writing in America’s Schools and Colleges)

As research has shown, many teachers know first-hand, one-time events that offer professional development may provide the impetus for change, but often fail to allow for the incubation that new ideas need in order to grow and become part of a teacher’s practice. Too often, the ideas from a Friday afternoon in-service get lost in the Monday morning madness of teaching. Moreover, without ample time to explore, challenge and integrate the methods shared in professional development seminars, practicing teachers rarely have opportunities to fully understand the impact of each teaching method, classroom management tool, or psychological strategy on their pedagogy.

To that end, the National Writing Project (NWP) – <http://www.writingproject.org/> – began

thirty years ago with the motto and the mission that “teachers teaching teachers” would provide the best occasion for meaningful and lasting professional development. Based on teaching demonstrations and writing response groups, four-week summer invitational institutes made up of K-16 teachers of writing comprise NWP’s main work. Three decades and over 180 sites later, NWP has become the premier model for sustained, rigorous and teacher-centered professional development. As an organization, NWP draws its strength from individual sites which, as we will discuss, draw their strength from the teacher consultants that they produce. Sites generally begin at universities, and the Red Cedar Writing Project (RCWP) – <http://writing.msu.edu/rcwp> – is no exception.

In order to situate RCWP in a larger context of writing at a Big Ten University, we need a little history first. When Michigan State University (MSU) switched from quarters to semesters in 1992, the requirements for freshman writing changed from three quarters to a single semester of American Thought and Language as well as the writing-intensive, sophomore-level class Integrated Arts and Humanities.

Editors’ Note:

The RCWP profile that Hicks et al. provide is valuable not only because it highlights the excellent work of one National Writing Project (NWP) site, but also because similar articles could be written by other writing project sites throughout Michigan. The National Writing Projects of Michigan (NWPM) is a network of 9 writing project sites around the state. With the mandate of “teachers teaching teachers,” each site offers summer institutes, professional development services, and other programs by and for teachers. Many offer youth-oriented programs as well.

We encourage participation in your local site. For other NWP and NWPM information, see the following websites:

<http://www.writingproject.org>

<http://www.nwp-m.org>

A list of NWP sites in Michigan, with contact information, is on page 27 of the [LAJM](#).

To support writers who might need more than two courses, the MSU Writing Center opened its doors to these students as well as to all writers at all stages of the writing process. Thus, as part of a land grant university and understanding that literacy learning happens in context and across a lifetime, the MSU Writing Center founding director Patricia Lambert Stock saw that its mission would be one that expanded opportunities for the teaching and learning of writing beyond just the four years of college; RCWP plays an integral role in that mission as it reaches K-16 teachers across the state.

In examining the purpose of RCWP, a brief excerpt from its website highlights the unique combination of factors that fulfill this mission:

The Red Cedar Writing Project is a Community of outstanding teacher scholars, researchers, and leaders who come together for four weeks in the summer and periodically throughout the year to share their teaching experiences and develop classroom-based research projects that explore and highlight current theory in the teaching of writing. (Red Cedar Writing Project)

Thus, RCWP positions itself as both a viable means of professional development and as an agent of change in the K-16 teaching of writing. The initial opportunity for professional development through the four-week summer institute welcomes teachers into the range of experiences that RCWP offers. Once teachers become involved in this aspect of the project, they are then offered another level of professional development that, we feel, truly affords the best chance for professional growth: teacher leadership.

Why teacher leadership? As any practicing teacher can tell you, the demands of the classroom often place us in roles where we feel like our voices aren't heard. A sense of efficacy is a crucial part of a teacher's professional persona. As Smith described it nearly a decade ago:

More than ever, the National Writing Project is an alternative model that asks teachers... to initiate change, to take the lead in improving the profession. This model, as opposed to the traditional model of teacher as passenger, demands that teachers get behind the wheel and make informed decisions about where to go and how to get there. (Smith)

Rather than having professional development be something that is done to them, NWP programs invite teachers to become active participants in the activities related to the writing project. In turn, they become empowered teacher leaders who actively grow and sustain other teachers' professional development and their students' success. RCWP offers many professional development opportunities that, one by one, develop teacher leaders.

RCWP Professional Development Opportunities

The core of RCWP's, and all NWP sites', work involves the Summer Invitational Institute for teachers. For RCWP, we spread the work of the institute out across four weeks each summer, with (officially) extended 9:00 AM to 9:00 PM days during the first week and regular (although often-extended!) 9:00 – 4:00 days during the remainder. These days are designed with the idea that teachers, by modeling their best practices, can learn from each other and collaborate successfully in writing and reading groups.

These days generally take the shape described below:

Sacred Writing Time – We begin the day by honoring the spirit of NWP and allow our teachers to be writers. Usually we have a prompt, offered by one of the site leaders or teacher participants, and then take half an hour of quiet time to reflect, write and brainstorm new ideas. Most participants consider this the best part of the day.

Teaching Demonstration – After a morning snack, each day progresses to the teaching demonstration. One teacher participant will present a lesson that they believe is illustrative of “best

practices” in the teaching of reading and writing. These lessons are highly interactive, engaging, and, quite often, filled with the personality and wit of the presenter. During this hour-and-a-half session, the teacher will lead us as if we were his or her class, usually with enlightening, humorous and/or heartbreaking discussions about teaching, learning and writing along the way.

Response Groups – After the demonstration, we break into response groups and write a letter to the demonstrator. In this letter, we offer our ideas about the demonstration in five key areas: Thoughts as Teachers and Learners, Elements of Best Practice, Content Standards and Benchmarks, Extensions and Adaptations and Questions Arisen. This protocol, developed by RCWP Director Janet Swenson and former Co-Director, Diana Mitchell, offers responses that form genuine, insightful feedback from a group of peers to the demonstrator. This feedback then become the basis of a “Little Book of Promising Practices” that we compile at the end of the invitational.

Lunch – Most of the time, teachers keep on working right through lunch. Often, this is extra time for writing groups to meet, special interest groups to talk, or time for portfolio construction and collaboration. (Of course, whatever food was leftover from the morning snack is gone by this point!)

Writing and Reading Groups – In the afternoons, we spend time responding to our peers’ writing in groups. As each writer sets his or her own agenda for the response, we listen to the pieces read aloud and then offer feedback as we would ask students to do in our classes. Reading groups work much the same way in that we share our thoughts on professional texts, either by grade level or area of interest (for instance, such topics as assessment, portfolios, or writing workshops might be addressed).

The variety of the experiences, the shared nature of the tasks, and the overall reliance on the participants to make their own decisions about what topics we cover and how to do so, help the teacher consultants develop a sense of camaraderie and

professional connection with a tightly-knit group of peers. This connection is at the core of RCWP’s work and its continued success.

But, what happens once the summer institute is over? Some people think that Writing Projects end on the last day, but that is not the case. In RCWP, we offer many continuity events every year to help our teacher consultants stay connected and involved and to continue developing professionally. This is where the teacher leadership really begins. After participants become full-fledged teacher consultants, we then invite them to lead and contribute in new ways.

Advanced Institutes – We encourage teachers to both lead and become part of institutes that focus on particular issues raised in summer invitationals. These Advanced Institutes take on a special-topic focus such as the Advanced Placement Exam, MEAP, technology or teaching in urban schools. Offered as 3-5 day workshops, these institutes attract many RCWP teachers who are looking to develop skills in areas not traditionally served by one-time events traditionally associated with school in-services.

Workshops and In-services – Since we believe professional development occurs in context and across a time span of more than one afternoon, RCWP offers local school districts in-services in writing across the curriculum, developing writing workshops and other pertinent topics as a series of events across the school year. For instance, a school might request a kick-off presentation to the entire staff in the fall, small workshops with groups of teachers or students throughout the year, and then a summary event in May. The idea is that we don’t purport to offer “one-time fixes,” but rather try to engage the staff with issues about writing over time so they can try new ideas, come back to discuss them and then try them again.

LETS Work – A new continuity program this year includes the NWP initiative Learning Essentials from Teacher and Student Work (<http://www.lasw.org/>). Coordinated by Mitch Nobis and Davena Jackson, this group meets monthly to use protocols to analyze student writing and teachers’

assignments. Rather than focusing on the criticisms, LETS Work encourages teachers to highlight the qualities of students' writing and encourage them to think about ways in which to help students improve writing by building upon these qualities. RCWP plans to train more of its own participants in the near future.

Youth Programs – Both MSU and RCWP pride themselves on the quality of their youth programming. Through MSU's Spartan Youth Program (<http://spartanyouth.msu.edu/>), RCWP offers Spartan Elementary and Middle School Writing Camps (<http://writing.msu.edu/k12/swc/default.html>) and the Greenrock High School Writers Retreat (<http://writing.msu.edu/k12/greenrock/default.html>) each summer. Coordinated by Renee Webster and Ninna Roth, these programs bring K-12 students to MSU for sessions that involve them in campus tours and writing that culminate in the production of their own anthology publication. Each summer, RCWP TCs facilitate the camps, providing them time to enjoy work with students who are passionate about writing while trying innovative lessons and prompts.

Technology – As with many NWP sites, RCWP actively integrates technology into our daily practice. Relying on Troy Hicks as a Technology Liaison and the teacher consultants themselves, each day in the institute finds participants composing their work on word processors, using the internet for research and sharing files online. This past summer, a few teachers incorporated technology specifically into their teaching demonstration and many brought laptops on which to work each day. Many also developed digital portfolios at the end of the summer institute, rather than the traditional three-ring binder, thus exploring the connections between digital literacy and writing. In the future, RCWP plans to offer more technology-based seminars and workshops for TCs who aspire to integrate digital literacy skills into their teaching.

The RCWP listserv also allows TCs to stay in touch over the course of the hectic school year. At any given time, conversations about future meetings, trends in literacy instruction, debates about the

MEAP or good news about a wedding or new baby may bubble up on the list. These networking opportunities continue to foster the camaraderie that makes NWP sites professionally valuable (Swenson).

Bridges, the RCWP Newsletter – Publication, as all writing teachers know, allows students to hone their writing for a particular audience. We encourage our TCs to publish as well, both through traditional professional organizations such as MCTE and NCTE, but also through our site-based newsletter, *Bridges*. This outlet gives teachers a chance to go through the publication process. In turn, RCWP teachers can then share their own publication experience with their students.

Teachers as Writers - For continued professional development as well as love of writing and friendship, a group of RCWP teacher consultants meets monthly to share dinner and a writing workshop. Sometimes at area restaurants or bookstores, other times at members' homes, a gathering of writers come together to keep the spirit of what Parker Palmer calls "The Writing Life" alive.

Begun in the fall of 2001 following the Invitation Summer Institute after some members had expressed an interest in continuing the celebration of writing, Mary Anna Kruch organized the first meeting at The Writing Center. Ordinarily, Teachers as Writers' gatherings begin with dinner and are followed by a literary, art, or music prompt and then about 20-30 minutes of individual Sacred Writing Time, sharing and responding in small writing groups, and finally reading their pieces to the whole group. We set a date, time and place for the next gathering before departing. Setting aside time for our own writing not only has served as a bridge to the profound experiences we shared in the Summer Institutes—this practice has also been a constant reminder that writing and exploring our own literacy processes make us better teachers of writing.

Other Continuity Programs – Throughout the year, RCWP offers continuity programs that range from monthly writing groups to large events such as writing marathons. Each event, hosted by RCWP TCs, builds on the social nature of teachers and

writers as professionals who enjoy food, fun and engaging topics. For instance, The RCWP Dine & Discuss allows teachers to come together to discuss professional issues, such as writing evaluation, use of portfolios in writing programs, and more. In the Dine and Discuss group, we also read and discuss both fictional and professional texts. There are also annual events such as a holiday gathering and a semester sequester meeting that allow us to refresh our social and professional connections within the Writing Project.

All told, these events provide TCs with leadership opportunities. By offering these chances for personal and professional growth, we attempt to empower teachers as participants in their own professional development, rather than just recipients of traditional modes of in-service.

Future Directions for Professional Development and Leadership Opportunities

As RCWP continues to grow, we are also finding new ways of engaging both our TCs and other teachers around the state in authentic professional development. Working in conjunction with NWPM, we plan to recruit new TCs from underrepresented areas of the state as we plan for future summer institutes. This will diversify the impact of NWP both in individual classrooms throughout the state and encourage teacher leadership.

Another initiative we plan to participate in is NWP's Reading Initiative (<http://www.writingproject.org/Programs/nri/index.html>). Led by RCWP Co-Director, Toby Kahn-Loftus, this initiative seeks to strengthen student comprehension through the reading and writing connection. Returning to our strong belief that literacy skills are learned in context and across a lifetime, participating in this initiative will allow teacher leaders to make links between reading and writing in their own classrooms. Four TCs will participate in the initiative in the beginning and will develop literacy materials that will then be disseminated widely across NWP.

This initiative, will be a main focus. We believe that the convergence of multiple literacies

such as digital, informational, visual and media – and the teaching thereof – will largely fall on the shoulders of language arts teachers. Actively engaging with the pedagogy of these literacies will ultimately promote teachers' abilities.

To continue the work of RCWP and its outreach as described above, we seek to develop teacher leaders who can conduct workshops and lead other teachers in a similar mode of professional development. Having been through the summer institute, our TCs can both refine their demonstrations for presentation to other K-12 teacher audiences.

What Teachers Say About RCWP

As a testimonial to the engagement and connection many teachers feel towards the NWP and their home site in particular, a few words from our own teacher consultants illustrate the power of participating and leading events for RCWP:

Renee Webster, Perry Elementary School:

Reflecting on my experiences in the RCWP reminds me of a quote I have hanging in my classroom from Susan Kovalik's book, *Integrated Thematic Instruction*, "Long term memory is created by a chemical change in the brain when you are: Joyful, Involved, Excited, Curious, Anticipating, or Highly Emotional." For me, my experience in Red Cedar Writing Project Summer Institute and my continued fellowship with RCWP contains all of these emotions and a abundance of opportunities to grow in my profession. It is certainly joyful as we eat together and build friendships with an extended family of teachers. The sharing of affirmations with other teachers is motivational, encouraging, and confidence building. This fellowship creates a caring environment and helps establish the support needed for risk taking and growth.

My involvement with RCWP has allowed me to discover new opportunities for myself as a learner and as a teacher researcher. This excitement is the direct result of working with and having the opportunity to learn from other quality educators who were willing to share their expertise with me.

RCWP helps me stay connected to teachers across the state, provide an outlet for my teacher research, supports my personal readings and writings, and supports me in my professional development. It is truly is a life-changing experience.

Mitch Nobis, Bath High School

For me, gaining a position of teacher leadership within RCWP empowered me professionally and personally. It has given me the opportunity to expand my thinking on professional issues by looking at them from widely differing perspectives. When faced with a situation in my own teaching, I no longer address it as a problem only to be fixed, but as one worth reflecting on and discussing with others. I am clearly a better teacher since working in a leadership position. Through scheduling and facilitating RCWP events, I gain both confidence in myself as a leader and knowledge about the many issues facing English education. Teaching English is a complex task, and acquiring further confidence and knowledge have made me a more accomplished, and hopefully wiser, educator.

Conclusion

The National Writing Project and sites like The Red Cedar Writing Project, along with other National Writing Project of Michigan sites, will continue to provide teachers the chance to participate in sustained, personalized and meaningful opportunities for growth and change. Realizing that teaching and learning literacy skills doesn't come from one-time in-services or in discrete pieces, we will continue to provide opportunities for peers to inform their colleagues about their own teaching practice for teacher leadership as a primary mode of professional development.

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