The Work of the National Writing Project

Social Practices in a Network Context

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The Work of the National Writing Project: Social Practices in a Network Context is to be published in F. Hernandez et al., eds. **The Social Geographies of Educational Change.** The Netherlands: Kluwer Publishing Co. Forthcoming. It is printed here by permission of the authors.

The paper on which this essay is based was delivered at the conference on The Social Geographies of Educational Change: Contexts, Networks, and Generalizeability, March 11–14, 2001, Barcelona.

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Overview

The research on networks for educational reform continues to grow, teaching us just how these seemingly loose and flexible organizational forms work to organize teachers and principals to participate in their own development (Adams, 2000; Lieberman and McLaughlin, 1992; Lieberman and Grolnick, 1996; Lieberman and Wood, in press). We are learning about the need to build professional communities and how complicated, fragile, and rare they are (Grossman and Wineburg, in press; McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993; Westheimer, 1998), but we still need to understand better what successful networks do, how they organize their work, and what makes them endure.

In a two-year study (1997–1999) of two sites of the National Writing Project, we learned how the most successful professional development network in the United States connects particular social practices (the way they work) to a networklike way of organizing (how they spread the work), helping it grow, deepen, and continue to be responsive to its constituencies in the face of a rapidly changing reform environment. This paper discusses the social practices as they are developed in two sites and the networklike arrangements that develop around them. Issues of learning, leadership, and commitment are discussed as are lessons, challenges, and nagging questions concerning the role of networks in school reform.

For two years, we immersed ourselves in two sites[1] of the National Writing Project (NWP).[2] We wanted to look at a more mature site, one that had been around for a while, and one that was relatively new. We were interested in seeing the differences between urban and rural sites and how, or if, adaptations were made to the NWP model in different contexts. With the help of the national staff, we were encouraged to go to Los Angeles, a site that was 24 years old and housed at the University of California: Los Angeles (UCLA), and Oklahoma State University (OSU) in Clearwater, Oklahoma, a site that was six years old at the time of the study. We wanted to know what "the work" looked like and how this work connected to the building of a professional community among the teachers. Recognizing that there were thousands of teachers that were touched by the Writing Project (WP), we also wanted to understand the network arrangements that appeared to provide the organizational frame for "the work."

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[1] A site grows out of a university–school partnership. The university is the contractual agent and "owner" of the site. Beginning sites receive $20,000 and must document both their plans and their work and keep accurate information on who comes, how many people, and the nature of their formats for work during the year. A university- and a school-based educator must be involved in the leadership.

[2] The National Writing Project is a national network. It's purposes are:
- to improve student writing abilities by improving teaching and learning;
- to provide professional development programs for classroom teachers;
- to expand the professional roles of teachers.

It has served over two million teachers and administrators from 1973 to 2000.

Creating a Social Context for Learning

Talking to members of the WP community, we invariably heard references to "the work" or "the model" and the importance of being faithful to it while extending it. In time, we realized that our informants tended to use the two terms interchangeably and that both connoted something essential and identifiable about the WP's unique approach to professional development. More than a set of teaching techniques or a foundational belief system, "the work," as a national director explained, is the "enactment of a culture" (Int., Sept. 2000). Eager to see what she meant by this, we followed the advice of site directors and observed the summer institutes, the annual invitationals inducting new WP members. As one of them explained, "It all happens there."

Observing the institutes, we saw firsthand that "the work" is actually a pervasive and powerful set of social practices leading to the creation of strong learning communities (Lieberman and Wood, forthcoming).[3] Three core and recurring activities initiate institute fellows into these practices: teaching demonstrations, "the author's chair" (The term "the author's chair" was used in the two sites we studied. Teachers actually sit in a chair in front of the audience to share their writing and get feedback from the group.) and writing groups. Rooted in the WP's dual commitment to writing-to-learn and teachers-teaching-other-teachers, these activities release professional knowledge and establish professional relationships. Each involves teachers teaching other teachers, and each requires public performance with audience feedback. In all three activities, participants alternate between giving presentations and listening to others present. In short, all three stress learning as a social phenomenon (Wenger, 1998).

The teaching demonstrations, for example, invite teachers, one at a time, to share a favorite classroom strategy with peers. Presentations, of course, draw on teachers' expertise, bringing to surface the practical wisdom that they build from practice. As one teacher consultant (TC)[4] told us about the value of teaching demonstrations, "They force you to sit down and be very thoughtful about what you're trying to do and how you're going to go about doing it" (TC Int., Nov. 1998). After each demonstration, the presenter receives oral comments and/or letters from peers who describe its strengths, offer suggestions, ask questions, or imagine how they might incorporate what they've heard into their own work. Overall, presentations provide a means for teachers to share ideas and strategies; to recognize collective professional expertise; to build knowledge; and to rethink, revise, and adapt practices.

The teaching demonstrations we saw in the summer institutes ranged over wide territory. Teachers presented strategies for engaging students in all sorts of reading and writing

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[3] Portions of this paper were adapted from a forthcoming book entitled ***Inside the National Writing Project: Network Learning and Classroom Teaching: A New Synthesis.***

[4] Teacher consultants are those teachers who volunteer to lead professional development workshops, or lead special interest groups, or in some way take leadership in the site.

activities. They demonstrated ways to embed state-mandated standards in classroom lessons without sacrificing a learner-centered classroom. They showed one another how to encourage literacy in students whose first language is not English, as well as how to teach fine points in grammar, spelling, and punctuation without significantly interrupting the writing process. As the ideas and strategies poured out, we saw an ethic of privacy (Lortie, 1975) give way to an ethic of "swapping ideas." Pride in collective expertise seems to overcome stage fright as the weeks progress and individual voices strengthen.

A similar phenomenon occurs when teachers take the "author's chair," a tradition seminal to the summer institutes as well as to WP classrooms. The writing projects that institute fellows undertake over the five weeks include personal writing, position papers, journal articles, imaginative literature, parent newsletters, and curriculum rationales. Once an institute fellow judges a draft ready, he or she signs up for the "author's chair" and reads it to the large group. Colleagues' feedback informs subsequent revisions, and fellows see for themselves the benefits of developing a public voice and taking professional work to a public space for edification and critique.

To support these activities, every fellow belongs to a writing group during the summer institute. These small groups create a safe interpersonal context for sharing writing and receiving feedback on it, and they are lifesavers for those teachers who are at first particularly reticent to speak in public. As one TC told us, "My writing group was the best thing for me about the summer institute; they gave me courage." Another said, "You have to have a safe place to start" (TC Int., Oct. 1999, UCLA). Convening frequently and providing an interim space for sharing ideas and writing with a small group, the writing groups prepare fellows for the larger group presentations. They encourage sharing of the unpolished as well as the polished, and group members see firsthand how projects-under-construction improve through incremental feedback. One TC explained, "The best 'aha' was being in a writing group and having this chance to write and then people would respond to it very nicely, very sensitively, and provide really good criticism. This is wonderful" (TC Int., Summer 1999, UCLA). The experience of writing groups, in other words, scaffolds the huge step of taking professional work to a public arena and provides experiential evidence that taking that step will be, after all, worthwhile.

These three activities serve as linchpins to acquaint teachers with norms of the WP culture and bind community relationships within the institute cohorts. But there are other contributing factors. Tables in the room laden with refreshments and teaching resources provide nourishment for body and mind and deliver the message that people are cared for in the community. Every day a volunteer reads the log of the previous day's activities and provides an opportunity to relive them. This custom conveys a sense of the routines and rhythms of the institute, highlights the significance of shared experiences in building community, and reveals accumulating insights. Also, tucked into a typical day's proceedings are five-minute "quick-writes" to spark reflection or generate ideas.

Sometimes fellows participate in special interest groups, like "grade-alike" groups, to delve deeply into issues of mutual concern.

The WP approach to developing good writers and good teachers underscores two important principles. First, deep understanding arises from *practice*—in both of its common meanings. That is, both writers and teachers learn from *doing*. Writers get better at writing by actually writing, and teachers get better by teaching. Moreover, both improve by *practicing in public*. Valuing knowledge grounded in practice gives rise to the second principle: practitioners are the best teachers of other practitioners. Thus, writers are excellent teachers of other writers and teachers are the best teachers of teachers (Gray, 2000). Those actually involved in a practice gain contextualized understandings that make their ideas especially compelling and convincing to other practitioners. By taking the position that those who *practice* writing or teaching are most likely to be good at *teaching* it, the WP foregrounds expertise rooted in practice and elevates a nonhierarchical, peer-to-peer approach to teaching and learning. An experienced TC explains what this means to her:

> *Well, I think number one is that if I'm a teacher of writing I have to be a writer. That's, I guess, the biggest idea. And if I'm going to be a teacher of reading, I have to be a reader.... Then, the next step I learned was I need to share my teaching with other people and not be afraid to do that. And to know that I do have some good ideas that other people would like to hear about. And to go on and do more sharing professionally. (TC Int., Feb. 1999, OSU)*

Social Practices Leading to Professional Community

The social practices we saw operating in the summer institutes produced revitalizing and highly collaborative professional communities. Through them, teachers played the roles of both experts and learners, recognized and built knowledge from practice, and encouraged one another to continually seek better ways for reaching students. These practices are:

- Approaching every colleague as a potentially valuable contributor
- Teachers teaching other teachers
- Creating public forums for sharing, dialogue, and critique
- Turning ownership of learning over to learners
- Situating learning in practice and relationships
- Providing multiple entry points into learning communities
- Reflecting on teaching through reflection on learning
- Sharing leadership
- Adopting a stance of inquiry
- Rethinking professional identity and linking it to professional community

Before beginning our descriptions of these practices, we want to emphasize that isolating them for purposes of analysis unfortunately skews how they work in reality. In fact, we suspect that it is only in a culture that works consciously and persistently to integrate them that they truly reinforce and sustain one another. It is also important to stress that, having experienced the power of these practices in their own learning communities in the summer institutes and beyond, TCs work hard to incorporate them into their classrooms.

Approaching every colleague as a potentially valuable contributor

It is one thing to speak of a participatory community rhetorically and quite another to create a community in which every member actually does participate. Just as good writing teachers try to draw on the authentic voices and experiences of potential writers, the WP approaches every teacher as if what he or she thinks and has experienced matters. A site director explains, "…it was intended in the WP community that in the summer institute …there be an unconditional acceptance of who they [teachers] are, what they believe, and what they think" (Int., Nov. 1998, OSU).

Treating teachers this way makes them more willing to take the risk to contribute and belong to a professional community. It provides a powerful antidote to the isolation and silence all too typical of many teachers' professional lives. One teacher described the breakthrough she experienced from participation in the WP: "The big thing for me was recognizing I do know something and that others can benefit when I share it" (TC Int., Nov. 1998). In brief, this social practice invites every member of the community to develop and raise his or her voice so that everyone has the potential to make a unique contribution. Perhaps more subtly, it encourages teachers to be constantly growing professionally so they will continue to have something of substance to share.

Teachers teaching other teachers

Fundamental to the WP approach to professional development is teachers teaching other teachers. WP teachers teach colleagues in workshops, conferences, professional conversations, writing groups, teaching demonstrations, and so forth. This comprehensive practice topples traditional hierarchies, which seat knowledge in the authority of recognized experts or accepted theory. In the process, it releases what teachers have learned in, from, and for practice. One site director explains:

> *We always start with what teachers know. The WP is really an invitation for teachers to share what they know….We* need *what other people know…. This could be the person sitting next to us in the summer institute, or it could be the teacher down the hall. (Int., Oct. 1998, OSU)*

To adopt this social practice, then, requires a dual commitment from teachers. They must share what they know, and they must listen to what others know, the assumption being everyone has something both to teach and to learn. Most experience greater confidence in

themselves as learners because they know they have capable peers on whom they can depend for advice and guidance.

Creating public forums for teacher sharing, dialogue, and critique

Key to breaking through teacher isolation and silence are the public forums that the WP creates for teachers to share their work and then critique and discuss it. Throughout the summer institute, as we have described, teachers take center stage to read their writing or demonstrate a teaching practice. What is more, they become acclimated to seeing other teachers doing the same. We saw veteran TCs creatively establishing multiple forums to take their work public, such as presentations for parents and professional conferences, articles for professional journals, conversations via electronic conferencing, and contributions to local newsletters and newspapers.

Crucial to what WP teachers learn from going public with their work is the role of criticism and dialogue. In preparation for playing a more public role, institute fellows learn to give and take criticism in a professional manner. They develop a common investment in the quality of their public contributions. Despite the potential for interpersonal difficulties, most WP teachers refuse to lapse into a comfortable niceness that obstructs opportunities. They realize that if people are to learn from public performances, then criticism must play a role. The practices of public presentation, criticism, reflection, and self-criticism become community norms.

Turning ownership of learning over to learners

Wherever we went, we heard WP teachers talking about the importance of turning learning over to students so that they would develop a sense of ownership for it. Without that sense of ownership, they argued, learners are rarely truly engaged or motivated. In this spirit, the WP insists on professional development opportunities that are solidly teacher-centered. Teachers name their own problems and articulate their own problems and then have the freedom to design learning experiences around these.

A TC in a focus group summed it up this way: “The thing is to give responsibility to the students for their own learning, and then take responsibility for my own learning. That sort of says it all.” Such an attitude turns the prevailing idea about teacher accountability, as assessed through standardized tests, on its head. WP teachers practice an accountability to their students, not in response to outside monitoring, but because they belong to a professional community that demonstrates repeatedly how professional learning and student learning are mutually dependent and intertwined.

Situating human learning in practice and relationships

Teachers in the WP learn from practice—the practice of writing and the practice of teaching. Through their experiences in the WP, they see that meaningful learning is both

active and relational. Learning-by-doing and learning-in-relationships become for them essential conditions for the learning of their students and for their own professional development. We were struck with how many TCs told us they surrendered "teaching as telling" after the summer institute. One said:

> *I build a community in my classroom every year, which is one of those things that was most valuable to me as a learner in the summer institute. You experience for yourself what's valuable to help you be a writer and learner there and you want your students to have the same experience. (Focus Group, Feb. 1999, OSU, Sisley)*

Creating the kind of community that nourishes learning is, of course, complicated work, whether it is in the classroom or in a professional development activity. When people learn, not just by listening, but by actively undertaking some project or task, they must take risks. They need a community tolerant and compassionate about mistakes and ready with constructive critique and suggestions. TCs, therefore, whether teaching students or other teachers, place a high priority on learners' relationships with one another, not as a "feel-good" context, but as a vigorous intellectual context for learning (Wood and Lieberman, 2000; Lieberman and Wood, forthcoming).

Providing multiple entry points into learning communities

We were struck with how many ways teachers described the benefits of belonging to the WP community. We met teachers who came to the WP because they were searching for new ways to motivate students to read and write. We met teachers hungry for teaching strategies and resources. Some teachers came because they wanted to share their own talent and expertise with other teachers. Others wanted the opportunity to explore their own writing. Some expressed a need for a professional community. Still others simply felt honored by the invitation and came into the community not knowing what to expect but deeply appreciating what they found.

By providing multiple entry points for engagement to meet all these needs, the WP avoids ideological singularity and, in fact, succeeds in promoting a kind of pluralism. The WP offers "no great truth" (Int., Nov. 1998, OSU), but it does offer an opportunity for teachers to come together to name and investigate their own challenges and problems. WP teachers tend to have little faith in ready-made solutions purported to work in all contexts, but they are always in search of better ways to reach the particular students in their classrooms. Most WP teachers, in fact, learn to "embrace contraries" (Elbow, 1986) or to create new syntheses out of apparent dualities. They recognize that their own professional learning, for instance, necessarily encompasses both technique and philosophy, both personal responsibility and community involvement, both a concern for individuals and a concern for the community, both knowledge from the inside and knowledge from without. The needs of specific children demand a repertoire of responses and not adherence to a strict ideology.

Reflecting on teaching through reflection on learning

Much professional development is based on a simplistic cause-and-effect, linear relationship between teaching and learning (Smith, 1995; Wenger, 1998). Consequently, in-services frequently promote "best practices" for teaching. The WP, on the other hand, begins with a focus on the process of learning by providing these experiences during the summer institutes. WP teachers told us again and again that by thinking and talking about what happened to them during the institutes, they came to see learning results not from teaching per se, but by allowing learners to feel efficacious in the context of learning community. It is their experiences and interactions with other professional teachers that helps them to recognize how motivating, inspirational, and practical learning-in-relationship can be.

In line with the idea that the best teachers of any practice are practitioners themselves—whether of writing or teaching, the WP holds that the best teachers for learners are learners themselves. As WP teachers engage in the learning process, they pay attention to the frustrations, fears, joys, and triumphs of being a learner. It is, of course, currently fashionable to recommend reflection on practice. But what seems especially valuable about the WP approach is that reflection begins with learning and then moves out to teaching.

Sharing leadership

One of the most obvious practices of the WP community is the sharing of leadership. Starting with the summer institute, when each individual fellow takes a turn at taking the author's chair, demonstrating a lesson, logging activities, and so forth, the culture sets a norm for rotating leadership responsibilities. Acclimated to and practiced in playing leadership roles, TCs encounter a myriad of opportunities to continue the practice of leadership—both formally and informally—after the institute. A particularly strong leader describes how much she learned about leadership from the WP:

> *They [WP site directors] had a few… presentations from experienced people…. We [institute fellows] were helping each other and practicing and learning and then they gave us feedback on our presentations…. It was a growing experience…. When I came into a suburban school, I was the youngest person on the faculty, and when I left there eight years later, I was the second youngest person…. And it was very hard for me to even see myself as a leader until the Writing Project. (TC Int., Oct. 1999, UCLA)*

Once having recognized their potential for leadership, many WP teachers practice it enthusiastically in a variety of ways. Some become leaders in their own buildings, in the state, and in other professional associations and reform groups. Some contribute to the professional development of colleagues in their schools and beyond. Some even become involved politically, working to ensure that policies enable "the work."

Adopting a stance of inquiry

Permeating the entire WP culture is the idea that constant questioning and searching are fundamental to good teaching. A veteran TC told us that the WP helped her "gain this kind of inquiring stance into what I do, and to keep looking for answers when things aren't going in a right direction, to try to look at some evidence or data to try to figure it out. What could make it work better, or why isn't it working right, or, well, what else should I be doing here?" (TC Int., Feb.1999, OSU) Such a stance, of course, leads TCs easily to engagement in teacher research. Perhaps this attitude also accounts for the uncanny capacity of WP teachers to stay positive. Repeatedly, we heard TCs praising their own community for not becoming mired in habits of complaining. As one site director put it:

> *This kind of professional development invites teachers, me included, to share our best stories as opposed to the day-to-day talk in the faculty lounge. More negative talk happens there. In a Writing Project event, there's no time for the negative. But that isn't to say we don't look at the hard issues. It's just that we don't dwell in the negative. There's no time. There's too much to do. (Director Int., Summer, 1999, OSU)*

This propensity to be positive, rooted solidly in a strong sense of responsibility to students, demonstrates the faith WP teachers hold that together they can find better ways to reach students.

Rethinking professional identity and linking it to professional community

A TC told us during an interview that she thought of "writing as a bridge" (TC Int., Nov. 1998, OSU) that enabled learners to make connections with content, their teachers, and their colleagues. We saw the truth of her statement during the summer institutes when we witnessed how writing provides a bridge between individual fellows and the larger community. The self-disclosure necessarily involved in the sharing of writing creates a web of connections and draws the community closer. Because collegial exchange is so central to their experiences in the summer institutes, most WP teachers quite consciously internalize the value of professional community over time. Thus, WP teachers tend to develop professional identities, which demand high levels of participation in professional learning communities. To be a WP teacher is to be a colleague.

A case in point occurred when we approached, somewhat reluctantly, a TC to help us with our research project, knowing that she was terribly busy. When we asked if she was certain she could take on this extra task, she commented, "Oh, I always know that I'm going to get more out of it than I put in whenever I get involved in something like this. Anything involved with the WP is always like that." (TC Int., Summer 1999, OSU) Belonging to and participating in a community seems to generate more energy than it drains. Quality teaching becomes for them not an individual but a group responsibility.

Social Practices: Learning, Community, and Relationships

The "work" of the WP is fundamentally about learning what it means to be a learner and understanding in important ways what it means to help others learn. In WP terms, however, both can be accomplished only by establishing a set of social practices that frame how people think of themselves and interact with one another in a learning community. Wenger (1998) has written about "learning as social participation" (p. 4), making the claim that participation in communities of practitioners "shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" (p. 4). For him, such communities become arenas for professional learning because the people in them imbue activities with shared meanings, develop a sense of belonging, and create common identities. This is precisely what we saw happening in WP learning communities. The social practices adopted by the WP convey norms and purposes, they create a sense of belonging, and they shape professional identities. Because they are founded on principles of inclusion and pluralism, they tend to create learning communities capable of avoiding the ideological splits and conflicts with the potential to tear communities apart (Westheimer, 1998).

Currently, there is a great deal of public talk about teacher accountability in the United States, usually defined in terms of students' test scores. The WP in our view fosters a kind of teacher accountability much more likely to ensure productive learning experiences for students. WP teachers internalize the fundamental purpose for their professional community: finding ways to reach every student. This requires both sharing what one knows and seeking the counsel of others. An experienced TC talked about:

> *…feeling empowered as a teacher to say that maybe I do know something about how students best learn. And that it's not just a me-by-myself thing. There's been a lot of people who also are getting results or saying the same things. So I think that's also good to have a voice there. And to see, to be around successful teachers, to remain enthusiastic. The Writing Project, I think, keeps us all fresh. Keeps us caring and enthusiastic over the years.* (Focus Group, June 1998, UCLA)

Clearly, for this TC, it is the professional community that makes fulfillment of her responsibilities as a teacher a better possibility.

The alchemy of the WP, then, is really the enactment of social practices capable of building relationships, stimulating learning, developing voice and efficacy, conveying intellectual breadth to the work of teaching. No one could say it better than this TC describing what "the work" had done for her:

> *It's changed my life outside my teaching, inside my teaching. It's literally changed my whole life. It's given me a support system; it's given me friends; it's given me my writing back; it's given me my classroom back.* (Focus Group, April 1999, OSU)

The social practices that arise from the activities teachers participate in are not just a one-time thing, but are incorporated into the lives of the participants through the development of a network-like organizational structure. It is this structure that is rooted in the social practices which forms the basis for a wide array of formats in both the summer and yearly offerings.

Developing the Network: An Organizational Frame for the Social Practices

As we observed the summer institute, we began to see the seeds of a network-like way of organizing, which does several things: it inducts teachers into a way of working on their own learning while giving them practice in learning in a community (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2001). But it also provides the opportunity for teachers to find and nurture another talent: teaching other teachers what they have learned in the context of their own classroom. It is this opportunity that becomes the first building block of the network that seeds opportunities for growth and renewal of the leadership of the WP.

Teacher Consultants: Developing Leadership in the WP

Some teachers find it rewarding to teach adults and share their teaching strategies and dilemmas while engaging them in finding alternative solutions to teaching problems. Site directors look for teachers who have developed effective strategies and who show by their participation as learners in the Institute that they have internalized the WP way of learning. Many teachers find that in sharing their teaching practices with their fellow teachers, they have become quite articulate about certain practices—practices that have been tried, honed, and shaped over the years. In most Writing Project sites (95 percent), all teachers are called teacher consultants after they have completed the summer institute, whether or not they choose to become involved with in-service activities. A number of teachers do choose to participate as teachers of other teachers. In this way, the WP nurtures teacher leadership that can deepen the work in the site, enlarge the network, and keep people connected beyond the summer institute. One teacher consultant explained:

> *On one level, TCs work a lot on their own teaching. The continued discussions with teachers about teaching, whether giving a presentation or at meetings regarding new WP projects….On another level, you learn a lot about teacher learning through experience. It is not explicit… you have to stretch your thinking as a presenter as to what texts and structures you can use to give your audience a chance to experience the presentation rather than to watch it. (TC Int., Oct. 2000, UCLA)*

At OSU after the summer institute, TCs are invited to attend a “workshop on workshops,” an opportunity to learn how to organize the workshop way of learning. By becoming a TC, teachers not only stay connected to the “work” but they gain access to opportunities for shaping the network. For some it means organizing professional development in their own or other districts, starting special interest groups on topics of particular concern, leading

teacher research groups, organizing summer writing programs for students, and more. For every teacher who becomes a consultant, 15 other teachers are being served by the WP, and this ratio has remained constant over the last five years (St. John, 1999). While the process of becoming a TC varies at each site, the figures indicate that a substantial leadership cadre develops in each site—and it is this group that keeps the network grounded in the work of teachers.

The Advisory Group: Shaping Policy and Practice

Teachers participate in the leadership of shaping the network offerings as well. In every site there is an advisory board whose responsibility is to build the program of the network, create a variety of opportunities, and be diligent about keeping the network rooted in practice while it remains sensitive to the context wherein it resides.

At UCLA, the advisory board has grown over the years. It now consists of a director and codirector, both housed at UCLA, three associate directors (all teachers), and others in the university. They meet four times a year to develop both summer and yearly program offerings, troubleshoot existing problems, and issues, and create policies that support their practices of an ever-growing network. At OSU, their Writing Council also meets three or four times a year. It provides important input into the type of formats, places, and ways they will work, playing a lesser role in the vision and policies of the network due to the distances. These Writing Council meetings are used to cultivate leadership, disseminate information, and build the capacity of the site.

Urban/Rural Adaptations of Content and Format

Although all sites hold a summer invitational institute, beyond that the types of formats they develop and the content of their professional development differ in interesting ways. The context places heavy demands on the networks, responding to state policy as well as the exigencies of being in an urban or rural environment. However, the social practices appear to serve as core values in both sites, allowing them to make the necessary adaptations without losing the center of their beliefs and ways of working. This is a critically important phenomenon because it explains, in part, how this network continues to grow and deepen. It has found a way to hold to its core beliefs while it adapts in numerous ways to the policies, problems, and contemporary issues of its state and site. Our two sites give us some clues as to how this happens and help us not only understand how, in both cases, the social practices keep "the work" similar across sites, but also how the context influences the different kinds of relationships, formats, and delivery systems that become associated with the WP.

The UCLA Site[5]

Two policy initiatives have greatly affected the process of teaching and learning in the district since 1999. Proposition 227 limits a bilingual student to one year of English immersion—and high-stakes testing—where standardized tests are used as the criteria for passing and failing courses and graduating from high school.

Summer offerings reflect this changing policy context for teachers. The State of California has recently offered a big bonus to teachers who apply for and pass the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). The UCLA WP has responded with a support group for teachers that begins during the summer and meets throughout the year, seeing the teachers through the certification process. “From Research to Reading,” an initiative from the governor’s office, has been taken on by the WP. Since it is an effort to increase teachers’ literacy skills, the WP was well equipped to handle this initiative as part of their program. “Write from Day One” was developed as a summer workshop series to help teachers who are working with second-language learners and are concerned about developing their students’ skills and abilities in writing (and reading). This grew out of the direct needs of teachers who know they only have one year to deal with teaching English and need to figure out ways to use the time to develop literacy skills.

New special interest groups are encouraged (and organized) that reflect the needs of the urban population served by this site. This year the WP formed a group to discuss Advanced Placement Program® (AP®) courses in secondary school. (The AP Program enables students to enroll in challenging college-level courses while still in high school and to obtain college credit or placement, or both, on the basis of their performance on rigorous AP Examinations.) Because it has become increasingly difficult for students to get into the University of California, the WP has decided to provide a Pre-AP™ workshop for secondary students and to figure out how to develop better ways of meeting AP student and teacher needs.[6]

Because this is a 24-year-old site, many relationships and structures have been created over the years. Four different partnerships with school districts have been developed. Some partnerships even cross state lines. A focus on standards was initiated as a national project involving the states of Washington and California, which both have mandated state standards for schools, making it possible for both states to discuss how they are accommodating standards within the WP way of working. Rather than destroying the work of the WP, the site has found ways to shape their responses to the policies, sometimes through special interest groups (AP), sometimes by nuancing policies that add to the work (adding standards to the lessons teachers teach each other), and sometimes by embracing

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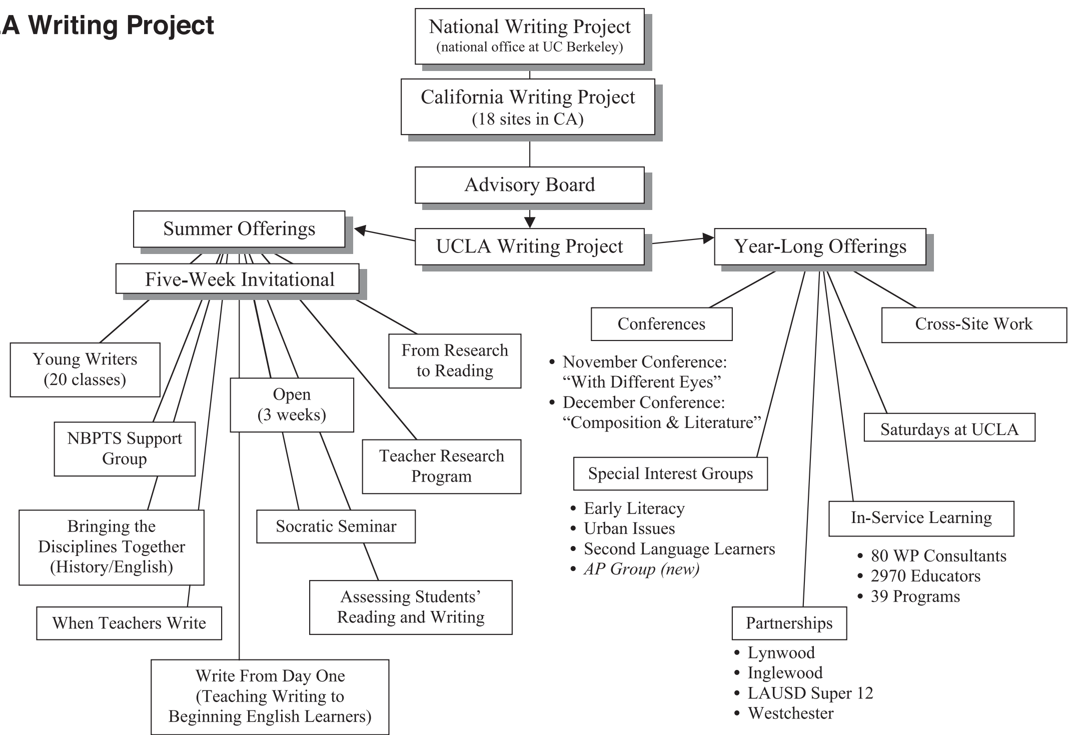
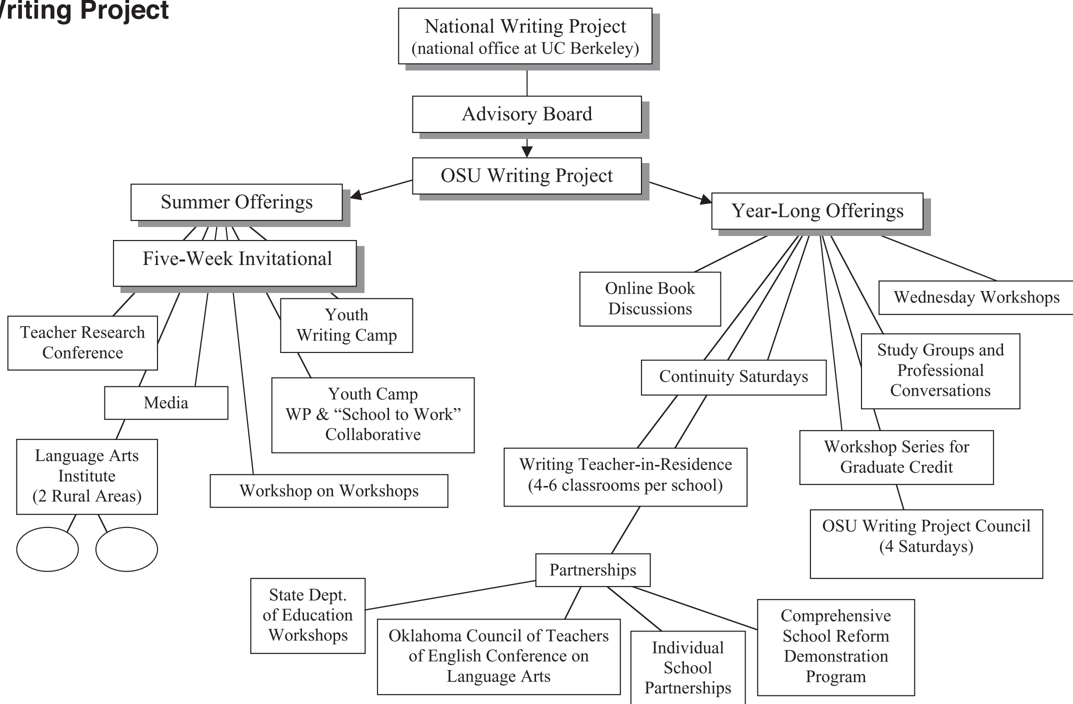
[5] The UCLA site is situated in the second largest school district in the United States. Its public school population numbers 800,000 and has become increasingly multi-ethnic (65 percent Latino, 14 percent African American, 12 percent Caucasian, 1.9 percent Pacific Islander and Native American).

[6] A group of parents has sued the city of Inglewood, California, because its schools have no AP courses and thus, the parents have argued, their students are less likely to be admitted to the UC campuses. In addition, research has shown that African American students do less well than their white counterparts. This issue has become important for the UCLA WP as well as the College Board, which supports AP teachers throughout the country.

UCLA Writing Project



Oklahoma State University Writing Project



the gap between the policies and the necessary strategies to put the practices in place (implementing state mandates through WP programming).

At UCLA, the Five-Week Invitational and the Open (an in-service version of the Invitational) remain constant as the core offerings of the WP, while some summer initiatives, such as providing classes for young writers continue to grow as others are phased out. This is a major advantage of network organization: It can shape the network and its activities to the needs of its members and the social context of its community. When activities cease to be of value or sustain an audience, they can be dropped as others develop. This flexibility and adaptability provide networks with a unique way of organizing, which helps them not only keep members, but continually attract new ones. Unlike formal organizations, these networks attract people for many reasons and can continually reinvent part of their work to stay current and enhance their attractiveness.

The Oklahoma Site

Because the service area covering the northern half of Oklahoma is large and predominantly rural, it is difficult to build up a critical mass of TCs (as in the UCLA site). Instead, the director and the TCs work to create a wide variety of offerings that try to overcome limitations of time, distance, and density. Rather than being defeated by the distances, the site makes special efforts to reach out and work with existing programs, piggyback on other meetings to make best use of time and travel, and offer a wide variety of professional development activities suited to the time and place where they are held.

The geographic service area incorporates a range of locations from tiny towns and farm communities to affluent suburbs and impoverished urban areas. Because of these distances and differences in context, time, budgeting and technology have all played a crucial role. Budgeting often must include lodging, and meetings are planned to start late and end early to accommodate driving times. Technology has not only played a crucial role in keeping people connected, but it has also encouraged online book groups and an e-journal. This has added an important dimension to this rural site, as it allows the WP way of working to take place online as well as with face-to-face offerings.

To provide a measure of consistency, OSU has created its own adaptation of the WP "work." They have invented a model that can be used by any TC throughout the state, since travel to remote towns is a part of their work. It consists of teacher demonstrations, teacher writing, writing groups, and teacher research. It has been used for mentoring new teachers and also for supporting the growth and development of experienced teachers. The model contains the essential principles of the WP: Involve teachers in their own writing, have teachers teach each other, and build a community that respects teacher knowledge as the starting point for growth.

Their way of working includes attaching to local and state initiatives. For example, the two language arts institutes are given in two different parts of the state and sponsored in cooperation

with the state Department of Education. The WP also works with the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, a federal program that sends money to the states when schools participate. In addition, they work with the Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English and other foundation-sponsored efforts such as the Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning (REAL), an Annenberg project involving students in a microcommunity setting.

This six-year-old site has been so successful in providing professional development that they have had to hire an in-service coordinator to manage the work and make sure that the groups with whom they work have purposes that are compatible with the OSU WP. They have developed a 30-hour professional development program dealing specifically with literacy development, which is taught by TCs. Through their work, they have become an important influence in the state, having gained the reputation of providing quality professional development with high teacher involvement. Although this site may never be able to build up a critical mass of TCs (at the same schools in the way an urban site can), they have learned to connect to existing initiatives on the one hand, and to take advantage of rural initiatives on the other. Isolation and distance, which will always be problems, are overcome by creating a model and a program that is transportable, attaching to local and statewide initiatives, and helping local districts define their needs for professional development. Because the OSU WP focuses on literacy, and because many mandates aim to get at this problem, it has become an invaluable resource in the state. In essence, the "net" of the network has been widely cast, recognizing that connecting to existing programs, while still giving their own summer institutes, keeps the WP true to its origins, while it collaborates and connects to other existing reform and professional development efforts.

Growing Leadership—The WP Way

Besides the local networks that are built around each site, the National Writing Project has, in the last five years, built special focus networks that have attracted WP teachers to networks where there are particular challenges that need inventive solutions. Among those is Project Outreach, a three-year initiative that supports sites in studying and improving their work with teachers who work in low-income areas. Increasing the diversity in local writing project leadership is another goal. The Urban Sites Network, established in 1988, organized teachers from 40 WP sites to focus on particular problems of urban areas and to reach out more effectively to teachers and students in underserved schools in WP sites. The Rural Sites Network, with teachers from 85 sites participating, did the same thing for rural communities. A new network has just been established called the English Language Learners Network, with a goal of bringing knowledge, awareness, and advocacy to language issues. Thirty-six sites of the WP are participating.

In the process of creating these new special interest networks, active teacher leadership has grown from 10,312 in 1997 to 12,748 (Annual Report, 1999). Because everyone in the WP is always "scouting talent" and because the network opportunities create need for

further leadership, the WP speaks of its leadership as “ubiquitous.” Although it begins with the Summer Institute and the development of teacher consultants, leadership opportunities are growing all the time. Site directors are always looking for and making possible new opportunities for teacher leadership. As one person in national leadership expressed it “you can move mountains if you don’t care who gets the credit.” Those in national leadership, site directors, and teacher consultants all speak the same language of facilitative leadership. As a person in national leadership said: “The idea is always to build community, to resist a top-down mentality, and to continue to find people who want to do ‘the work.’ ”

Social Practices and Network Organizing: A Key Lesson

A key lesson we learned through this study is that networks flourish when their social practices include opportunities to learn, to be in a community, and to take leadership in their local site. The WP does this through the organization of local sites housed in universities but led by a collaboration between university and K–12 teachers. Norms of shared leadership, collaborative work, and community are within the practices of the first induction experience. They are not preached but lived and experienced in the summer institute. Teacher leaders are not appointed, nor do they apply for the job—rather they are encouraged to become teacher consultants or, as in some cases, attendance in the summer institute makes them eligible. Teachers help spread the word, do the work, and continue to help formulate the contemporary needs of teachers—no matter what the context.

It is the network organizational structure that grows the local site and provides not only follow up for teachers, but a variety of means to belong to a community. This loose network organization keeps people connected face-to-face and electronically. Teachers can come to an occasional meeting, or they can commit themselves to leadership in local, state, and national efforts. In effect teachers go to a professional development institute and can gain a professional community.

It is the social practices, when developed as an integrated set of activities and ways of working, that keep the network anchored, but they also make possible the various adaptations that the local sites make—without losing the essence of the WP way of working. What teachers know is always the starting point for their learning and for their teaching of other teachers. Writing and literacy is the content, but the process is unwavering. A key lesson in this study seems to be that “scaling down” (providing a model that can be organized locally) in order to “scale up” (spreading the model) may be an alternative way of thinking about the current understanding of dissemination and the professional development of teachers (McDonald, 1996).

Challenges, Paradoxes, and Questions

On the face of it the National Writing Project looks like a strategy for improving teaching—one teacher at a time. But we found upon close study that this oversimplifies the layered complexity of both the national and local sites. In some well-developed sites, the WP is actually working with whole schools, districts, and groups of schools. But they do it after a period of building relationships and developing teacher leaders. At UCLA, the site was working with individuals, schools, groups of schools, and district partnerships. At OSU, we found that the WP was working with every major reform effort, at schools, in districts, and even statewide. We suspect that in a study of other sites, other such arrangements exist as well.

Yet no strategy as complex as this national network is without challenge. For example, a major problem of this decentralized model of professional development is quality control. How do you keep track of what the local sites are doing? How do we know what teachers are doing, what students are learning?[7] Still another important yet challenging problem is that of the school–university partnerships that are an integral part of the strategy. Seating the WP in a university has, in many instances, brought the knowledge of the university and the knowledge of practicing teachers together, each supporting the other. But there are universities that marginalize the work and see it as yet another class for an instructor. Even in the universities where the relationships are solid, keeping an independent "third space," while institutionalizing other parts of the WP can be problematic.

As accountability is being reframed in the United States, the WP is being pushed to show that their efforts lead to higher test scores. This has pushed the WP to collect data on teachers who have participated in WP activities. A three-year study has been commissioned by the NWP (AED evaluation, 2001). The first year of the evaluation found positive outcomes by looking at the writing of teachers in four states and comparing them to a rubric written by the Department of Defense. For the second year, the evaluators are looking at the impact of the WP on the assignments teachers give and the relationship between the assignments and student achievement.

An interesting paradox for school reformers is that to build commitment to continuous learning, teacher networks like the WP offer great hope for improving teaching and learning. Many teachers claim that their lives and work have been transformed (our study as well as the AED study begin to show evidence of this), yet their own school cultures often remain relatively untouched. On the other hand, developing teacher networks outside of their school gives teachers opportunities to build their capacity to collaborate with their peers, to go public with their work, to develop an unquenching thirst for improvement, to

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[7] Aware of this problem, the National Office has done several things: There is an annual review of all sites submitted for continuation of funding. Every site is reviewed by peers in the WP, and an extended response is given to the site. When the response is positive, those sites are asked to provide technical assistance to other sites. In addition, there is now a coordinator for the work of technical assistance in the WP.

do research on their practice, and, in many cases, to take responsibility for leadership. And, most important they become members of a community that accepts teaching as messy and uncertain, while never giving up on trying to improve. This kind of commitment is rare in most professional development efforts. Its longevity and its ability to tackle the tough problems and garner teacher involvement is unprecedented in the United States.

But tough questions remain. Can these social practices be used with other subject areas? Is there something about writing that connects the personal with the professional in a way that is different from other subjects? Is what they are doing transferable to other situations, other learning possibilities? Can a network like this one withstand the press for standardization and routinization current in the United States without losing the core of its "work," which is decidedly nonstandard, and nonroutine? This network is already 25 years old. Can it continue to handle its ever increasing complexity? How can the school–university connection be improved on the university side? Can the WP form of teacher accountability gain an audience and support in a high-stakes testing environment?

These questions are both conceptual and practical. It may be that we add to our conceptual understanding of networks and their practices and to particular practices that make the synthesis work. This network is an important example of the possible. It remains to be seen whether the WP is a unique entity in and of itself, with its own history and development, or whether any or all of its practices can be duplicated in different configurations, with different subject areas in different networks.

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