

Southern Nevada Writing Project

School-Based Writing Studios

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What is the program design?

Southern Nevada Writing Project's new-teacher program is designed to support the new teachers through monthly after-school collegial groups in their own school settings. In most schools, these have developed as study groups. In a small number of schools, writing studios have emerged.

How is it implemented?

Teacher-consultants who have developed a reputation among their colleagues as knowledgeable resources and as supportive to their fellow teachers are selected to become group leaders (of either a study group or a writing studio) at their own schools. In the spirit of collegiality and professionalism, they invite novice and veteran teachers to join them at monthly sessions to explore issues of interest.

Both types of group are grounded in inquiry. Study groups see themselves as professional discursive communities that use a variety of strategies to solve problems. Professional texts are often used to begin substantive conversations and to surface issues for further inquiry. Writing studios come together with the goal of reinvigorating the writing life of teachers and utilize writing as a tool to explore and inquire into the teaching of writing. Both groups make extensive use of protocols for structured conversation.

To support the work of both groups, teacher-consultants leading them undergo a rigorous week of Critical Friends Group Coaches Training during the summer in order to ensure that their work is structured, effective, and relevant to the lives of their individual schools. Additionally, throughout the year, all of the teacher-consultant leaders come together on a monthly basis to examine, document, and tune their on-site work.

What is the design rationale?

The SNWP is situated in one of the fastest-growing school districts in the country. In a district of enormous flux in both its personnel and student populations, each school site faces its own specific issues. The site-based programs led by teacher-consultants located in the new teachers' own buildings honors this diversity and local knowledge. Use of structured protocols ensures democratic dialogue within groups. At the same time, monthly meetings of teacher-consultant leaders to debrief with each other and to build mechanisms for supporting each site ensure a measure of equality across sites. The study groups and writing studios were designed to relieve pressure, build camaraderie, and return joy to the teaching experience.

Following are two of the protocols to encourage reflective practice.

The Final Word Protocol
(for use with a professional text such as Alfie Kohn’s article
“The Trouble With Rubrics”)

Purpose:

The purpose of this discussion format is to give each person in the group an opportunity to have his/her ideas, understandings, and perspective enhanced by hearing from others. With this format, the group can explore an article, clarify thinking, and question each others’ assumptions and beliefs in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issue. This version of The Final Word was adapted from the original by Jennifer Fischer-Mueller and Gene Thompson-Grove for NSRF—June 2002.

Roles:

Facilitator/timekeeper (who also participates) and participants.

Facilitation:

The role of the facilitator is to keep the process moving, keep it clear and directed to the article, and keep time so everyone gets an opportunity for a round. Participants should identify one “most” significant idea from the text (underlined or highlighted ahead of time). Groups of five work well; each round takes 8 minutes for a total time of about 40 minutes.

Process:

- The small groups sit in circles and identify facilitator/timekeepers.
- Each person needs to have one “most” significant idea highlighted from the text. It is often helpful to have a back-up quote as well.
- The first person begins by reading his/her highlighted quote. S/he should refer to where the quote is in the text. Then, in less than 3 minutes, s/he describes why that quote struck him or her. For example, why does s/he agree or disagree with the quote, what questions or issues does it raise, and/or what does s/he now wonder about in relation to that quote?
- Continuing around the circle, as the presenter listens, each person responds to that quote and what the presenter said, briefly in less than a minute. The purpose of the response is: 1. to expand on the presenter’s thinking about the quote and the issues raised by the quote; 2. to provide a different look at/perspective on the quote; 3. to clarify the presenter’s thinking about the quote; and/or 4. to question the presenter’s assumptions about the quote and the issues raised.
- After each person in the circle has responded for less than one minute, the presenter that began has the “final word.” In no more than one minute, the presenter responds to what has been said. Now what is s/he thinking? What is his or her reaction to what s/he has heard?
- Continue with this process until each person has had a round with his or her quote and has had the “final word.”

- For each round about 8 minutes should be allowed (circles of about 5 participants works well: presenter—3 minutes, 4 responders—1 minute each=4 minutes, presenter's final word—1 minute.
- End by debriefing the process in the small group.

The Making Meaning Protocol
The Storytelling Version
(for use in Writing Studio's first session)

Step One—Getting Started

(5 minutes)

- Write in your journal about a powerful learning experience you had as a school age child.
- Form triad groups and identify who will tell his/her story first and identify a facilitator and a timekeeper for each round.

- The storyteller tells her/his story. **(5 minutes)**
- The participants listen in silence, perhaps making brief notes about aspects of the story they find particularly significant.

Step Two—Clarifying Questions

(2 minutes)

- The facilitator asks the group for clarifying questions.

Step Three—Making Meaning of the Story

(5 minutes)

- The storyteller listens in silence while the group has a conversation discussing the following:
 - Why do you think the storyteller found this to be such a powerful learning experience?
 - What additional insights do the participants have about why the experience was so powerful for the storyteller?

Step Four—Storyteller Response

(3 minutes)

- The storyteller reflects for the group on any new insights on characteristics or conditions of the powerful learning.

The triad repeats steps 1 through 4 until all three groups members have told their story.

**(15 minutes
per round)**

Step five—Discussing Implications for Teaching and Learning (5 minutes)

- The facilitator invites everyone to share any thoughts they have about their own teaching, children's learning, or ways that this particular experience might influence their coaching of teaching and learning.

Step Six—Reflecting on the Making Meaning Protocol

(5 minutes)

- The groups reflect on the experiences of or reactions to the protocol as a whole.