

## **The Winthrop Writing Project's Conversation Partners**

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### **What is the resource?**

Conversation partners are former NTI participants who have expressed an interest in staying involved with the program and taking on a small leadership role. The conversation partners come from different schools, grade and subject levels, and districts, and were chosen based on their level of enthusiasm and interest, as well as their understanding of concepts essential to writing project work.

They had participated in both the monthly dinner meetings during the school year and the New Teacher Summer Institute at our site. When they became conversation partners, each was assigned a table at the coming year's dinner meetings and facilitated that table's conversations.

The conversation partners were given a prompt/activity to begin each dinner conversation. The topic was related to our work at a previous meeting or to that evening's meeting. This allowed these teachers to practice facilitating a professional discussion and to take on a site leadership role in an unthreatening manner. The role of a conversation partner allowed these teachers to find a professional home in our writing project site.

### **What is our rationale for using this resource?**

Each NTI meeting began with dinner and professional conversation. Often, there were five to seven tables of new teachers at the meetings, with a conversation partner assigned to each table. Before we had introduced the concept of conversation partners, we provided conversation starters related to the program for each dinner table, but the discussions often failed to stay focused on these topics.

A goal of the conversation partners was to keep the conversation focused, supplementing the discussions with their own experiences as new teachers. Because these conversation partners were new teacher themselves, our leadership team felt their opinions carried more validity than

opinions of veteran teachers.

### **How did we use the resource?**

The NTI Leadership Team communicated frequently with our conversation partners, both electronically and in person. Each month, the leadership team and the conversation partners met for 30 to 45 minutes prior to the NTI meetings to discuss the evening plans and plans for future programs. During this time, we discussed issues of concern within the program, and conversation partners gave the leadership team feedback on the program.

Because the conversation partners were so new to teaching and could empathize with the NTI participants, the leadership team trusted their opinions. We also used the article [“Keeping New English Teachers ‘Young’: Toward Best Practice in New Teacher Development”](#) (*English Journal* 95 (2), November 2005) as a springboard for conversation about the role of the conversation partner in the initial planning meeting.

### **What does this resource represent about our site’s work?**

The Winthrop Writing Project strives to build community among our teacher-consultants and to encourage and nurture new leaders. The conversation partners program has allowed us to advance these goals, helping us to stay focused on the challenges facing many beginning teachers. The conversation partners help link these new teachers to experienced, accomplished teachers who are active in our site.

At the same time, our site benefits from the infusion of new teachers, who, as we support them as conversation partners, become our new leaders. Also, the conversation partners help other new teachers stay connected and involved. The result is a stronger NTI program, a stronger site, and a more effective connection to local school districts.

Because the conversation partners were given a responsibility that required only a small amount of their time, they were not overwhelmed. The next step for these teachers will be to receive an invitation to the summer writing institute.

### **What was the impact on the new teachers?**

In implementing the conversation partner component, we were able to create a sense of community within our NTI program. Dinner conversations were more focused and centered on professional topics. The new teachers felt safe from judgment and evaluation as they shared their thoughts with one another. The conversation partners' involvement created a nonthreatening environment in which new teachers had an authentic voice. The conversation partners provided a model for the new teachers, and as they felt a sense of ownership at our site, the other new teachers came to see that our writing project site was a good place to be. As one veteran teacher says, "New teachers are going to align themselves with some group. It needs to be the writing project!"

### **Conversation Partner Sample Activities**

The following prompts/activities are samples of the materials that conversation partners used to generate dialogue and writing at each monthly meeting. These conversations took place during dinner prior to the evening's program.

#### **1. First meeting:**

*Ask participants at the table to introduce themselves and tell where and what they teach. Then invite the new teachers to write about and share one classroom experience from the week that made them smile.*

We chose to focus on something positive and very general, to make everyone feel comfortable. We did not want to overwhelm these teachers at the first meeting. We asked conversation partners and leadership team members to take the lead in sharing to help make the new teachers (NTs) comfortable with the sharing process. We use the verbal sharing as a writing warm-up and rehearsal—to provoke thought. We gave everyone—NTs, conversation partners, and NTI Leadership Team members—a journal to use during the weeks they were involved with NTI.

#### **2. Second meeting:**

Prior to the meeting, participants had read material on working with students and parents living in poverty. The conversation partner was given the following prompt:

*Ask each of the four questions, one at a time, giving each table participant approximately two*

*minutes to respond to each question.*

- *What information in the reading surprised you?*
- *What questions were raised in your mind?*
- *What did you learn or gain from the reading?*
- *What implications did the reading have for you as a new teacher?*

*Allow a few minutes at the end to wrap up the table conversation, highlighting themes or ideas that resonated from the discussion.*

*Before they attend the next session participants should write about one of their students who is in poverty and their relationship with that student.*

### **3. Third meeting:**

*Ask participants to take a moment to reflect on what they wrote about a student who was in poverty and their relationship with this student. As a conversation partner, you will share your writing first. Then invite participants, on a volunteer basis, to share their writing with the table. Take on the role of facilitator by connecting thoughts and ideas for the table group.*

### **4. Fourth meeting:**

This session revolved around grant writing. Before the meeting, NTI participants were asked to come with an idea for something they wanted for their classroom, their grade level, or their department.

Conversation partners were given the following activity:

*During dinner ask participants to share their ideas round-robin style. Start by sharing your own idea. Encourage new teachers to ask questions and give ideas to each other. Remind participants that they will be asked to report on what they did with the grant writing information that was presented.*

### **5. Fifth meeting:**

Prior to this session on classroom management, NTs were asked to write about a classroom

management issue or strategy that was working in their own classroom as well as to submit, in advance, classroom management questions for the panel presenting the program. During dinner, the conversation partner conducted the following activity:

*Open up the discussion by sharing your own positive management issues/strategy from your own classroom. Invite NTs to follow with their successes. Facilitate the conversation by making connections among teachers and asking questions.*

For more information, contact [Vickie Brockman](#) or [Elizabeth Bridges](#).