

Teacher Leadership: The National Writing Project Model

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Recently, two National Writing Project in New Hampshire (NWPNH) teacher consultants, Gail Bourn and Jennifer Carbonneau, presented keynote addresses at two North Country schools for audiences of approximately 100 people in each group. They demonstrated techniques for writing across the curriculum for all grade levels K–12 and in all disciplines, from mathematics to physical education. The audience included administrators—building principals and superintendents—as well as classroom teachers, specialists, and professional support personnel. The presentations were well received. A psychologist approached the presenters after one of the keynotes to express his awe at how applicable he found the material was to his work with students. A physical education teacher talked about how she could use reflective writing with her students to process their performance in the gym. Science teachers talked about using writing for close observations in laboratory work.

These two teacher consultants exemplify the Writing Project concept of teacher leadership. Both of them have a long history working with the Project, one since the first summer institute in 2002 and the other since 2007. They each have led study groups and professional learning

communities, taught courses through the Project, and done classroom consultations in their own school districts and in others. They each have become established literacy leaders in their schools and their districts. And both of them say that were it not for the Project, they would not have done any of this.

The keynote address was a new challenge for Carbonneau, and she expressed some nervousness about standing up in front of such a large audience, but as she and Bourn worked through preparing the material, Carbonneau gained confidence. “I know this,” she said. “I have lived this. I have worked with this at so many levels. I know this through practice, through my readings, and through my own work in classrooms.” She said later, “It came naturally. We knew enough of the theory and the practices that we have done ourselves to make the learning relevant to the participants and to respond on the spot to their concerns.”

Bourn drew on her long experience as a leader in the Project—she has been a co-director since 2006—as well as her more than 20 years of experience in elementary school classrooms. She says, “We can talk about all of the clichés of teacher leadership, but this is real. It’s through our interactions in the Project, through our study groups, through our reading, and most of all, through the ways we have applied this in classrooms that we can be confident about what we are presenting.” She went on to explain, “Both of us were able to draw on what we know about the theory and how we have applied that theory in actual practice. This is what gives us our credibility. I think about the time I had to do a demonstration of writing across the curriculum in Littleton [NH] in an industrial arts class. Before the teacher saw what I did with his students, he didn’t believe that writing had any relevance to his work. I don’t have any experience working with industrial arts, but I know how to use writing and I know the theory. And it worked. It drew in even students who don’t normally participate. Every single student was engaged with the activity. After I finished, the teacher saw all kinds of ways writing could be used in industrial arts. He gained a new appreciation, not only for writing, but for his students.”

Maniates and Mahiri (2011) note that “consistent research over time [has shown] that it is the teacher, rather than the method, that makes the difference in student learning”(p. 19) For more than 35 years, the National Writing Project has promoted teacher leadership through its summer invitational institutes and its core belief in the principle of “teachers teaching teachers.” This

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is more than the usual “train the trainers” model that is commonly in use with structured programs today. According to the National Writing Project website, “The National Writing Project focuses the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of our nation’s educators on sustained efforts to improve writing and learning for all learners” (National Writing Project, 2011, About NWP). This is accomplished through a model that involves certain core principles and is adapted to each

of the more than 200 sites of the National Writing Project. One of the core principles of the Project is that “[t]eachers at every level—from kindergarten through college—are the agents of reform; universities and schools are ideal partners for investing in that reform through professional development” (National Writing Project, 2011, About NWP). Thus, every Writing Project site involves a partnership between a host university and the school districts within its service area. Most projects have a university-based director and one or more co-directors who are based in the K–12 schools in the service area. The principle, in the way it is worded, clearly places teachers at the center. Universities and schools partner with teachers, but teachers are the agents of reform.

In the keynote that Bourn and Carbonneau gave in the North Country, they engaged the participants by asking them to write about how they used writing in their classrooms. They then had participants share their writing with a partner and then with the group. The two consultants were able to incorporate ideas from what the teachers had written and build on what they already knew about writing. As Wood and Lieberman (2000) wrote after studying a Writing Project summer institute, “They applied those principles much the same way they would in their classrooms.” Here Bourn and Carbonneau draw on a technique they have frequently used with their own students. Their strength and skill as teacher leaders grows out of their skill as teachers. As Wood and Lieberman put it, “By enriching their teaching skills, the teacher leaders grew in their abilities to support colleagues, increasing both the knowledge that they could share with fellow teachers and their understanding of the challenges that their peers faced. Their daily experiences of guiding peers taught these leaders how to help fellow teachers ‘own’ their teaching—how to reshape new ideas as their own, overcome fears of being exposed as a fraud, and renew their commitment to children.”

Carbonneau talks about how she has applied the work of the Writing Project in her teaching. “What the Project really does

is allow me to create leaders among the teachers I work with so we can become more effective in our collaborative efforts as a school as well. I know that in Littleton, there is a core of leaders that I have helped to develop that I can rely on in the school and within the district. The teachers wrote our school improvement grant. It is easier to live with because you own it—the teachers have created it. It is the ownership and learning from one another and creating that climate where you value what people have to offer.”

This illustrates another of the core principles of the National Writing Project. “Teachers who are well informed and effective in their practice can be successful teachers of other teachers as well as partners in educational research, development, and implementation. Collectively, teacher-leaders are our greatest resource for educational reform.” As Carbonneau puts it, “We develop that foundation in the summer institute. We learn to ask questions and challenge things. It doesn’t matter what your level of education is, there is always something to learn, and that is at the heart of any leadership initiative.”

The intensive summer leadership institute is the heart of the National Writing Project model. In New Hampshire, the Invitational Summer Institute (ISI) is held for five weeks each summer at Plymouth State University. Teachers apply to become Writing Project Fellows. They must submit a résumé of their professional experience and other supporting materials, undergo an interview with Writing Project leaders, and be selected to participate. At the institute, they divide their time between working on their own writing and reflecting about what it tells them about teaching writing, reading research, and researching writing pedagogy, and exploring their teaching practices related to the teaching of writing. They write so that they can become better writers and that they may know the process of writing from the inside out, but they also write in order to place themselves in the position of learners, to see themselves as writers and to experience the power of composition and revision.

The importance of writing as a mode of thinking is another essential tenet of the Writing Project. Writing and its central processes of composing, narrating, revising, and polishing act as a core metaphor in the Project itself. Just as we compose and revise and respond to each other’s writing, we also engage in the same processes with our thinking and our learning. We compose and revise and respond to each other’s practices, ideas, and thinking.

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The ISI, while providing a necessary foundation, is not the end of the process. The Writing Project places a premium on what it calls “continuity.” The goal of continuity activities is to keep ISI participants connected to the Project and to further their professional development. Teachers can be involved in study groups, writing groups, research groups, or teaching exploration groups. They deepen their knowledge of teaching writing while maintaining their contact with the Proj-

ect. The Project, through its extensive network both within and beyond the state, continues to provide support for them in their teaching of writing. Teachers who see themselves as potential providers of professional development are encouraged to become “returning Fellows.” Returning Fellows come back to the summer institute for a second year as co-facilitators. This advanced leadership institute prepares teachers to lead professional development activities for the Writing Project.

The third aspect of Writing Project work is in-service work, where Writing Project teacher consultants go out to schools to do workshops, conference presentations, teach courses, run youth and community programs, and do classroom consultations.

Four additional teacher consultants had each spent a day demonstrating writing practices in the Brown School, a primary (K–2) school in Berlin, NH, in the week leading up to the keynote presentation. School administrators were impressed with the consultants’ depth of knowledge and the way they interacted with both students and teachers. Bonnie Mulcahey, one of the consultants and a reading specialist at McClelland School in Rochester, NH, noted, “The 2nd grade teacher that I worked with was doing weekly prompts with her students and didn’t feel their writing was improving. When I met with her at the end of the day, she shared how she had referenced my lesson during her other lessons. We talked about the connection between reading and writing and how that would support both reading and writing progress. I saw a change in her practice right away that day.” As Lieberman and Wood wrote, “Participation in the National Writing Project supported these leaders in learning how to work with peers and gaining the confidence to do so. Encouraged to work collaboratively and go public with their successes, they adopted a stance of being both leaders and learners.” Mulcahey is confident in herself as a consultant and eager to support the teacher she worked with.

Lois Juris, another one of these consultants and a 1st grade teacher at Elm Street School in Laconia, NH, reported on her

experience in a 1st grade classroom: “The noticing that surprised them was how engaged *all* students were while writing. All three teachers set a goal of starting a writers workshop.”

Unlike many professional development programs for teachers that concentrate on training teachers to implement a specific program or envision leadership as training teachers to train others in a similar fashion, the Writing Project focuses on teachers as intellectuals, as reflective practitioners, and as leaders. It seeks to equip teachers with the knowledge, theory, experience, and facilitation skills to enable them to trust themselves and become effective leaders.

Carbonneau expressed this sentiment about her work, with teachers in her district: “The Project creates the confidence to create change in the classroom and to advocate for best practices among your peers. It keeps you grounded in the student. It can be threatening if you approach something as a concern about the teacher, but if you express it in terms of students’ needs, you create common ground. It’s all in the way you approach people. Everyone is a learner, and we can help teachers understand that being a teacher doesn’t stop you from learning. It’s starting to build the culture and creating the leaders within it. It’s empowering to give them a voice. They come to feel that they own all their work. That is why they felt rewarded.”

Part of the culture of the Writing Project is to welcome challenges to any and all ideas. We believe that when we challenge each other, we all become better thinkers. As Carbonneau said, “In the institute, we come to trust those experiences where you can disagree, come together, share, and grow. We set the tone in the first institute, where you can disagree and challenge and come to an agreement. Everyone has something to contribute and we respect each other so that we can grow together.” The Writing Project has worked hard to incorporate diverse perspectives at all levels of our work. We recognize that we all gain when we integrate multiple perspectives informed by culture and experience.

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Our in-service work is a way to reach out to teachers and to help them to begin to think differently about their practice. Carbonneau reflected on the experience of giving the keynote address: “There were teachers that were working there who treated it as a session where we were going to tell them what to do. We worked it through with them. You have to come up with a balance between the theory and the practice. Participants will get lost when you talk too much about theory at first because they are accustomed to

looking for a bag of tricks, but that is not real learning. The Writing Project is about creating that mind shift, and you can’t do that in one-shot deals. The institute gives you theory, theory, theory so Writing Project Fellows can be effective change agents.”

Our classrooms are full of dedicated, knowledgeable teachers like Bourn and Carbonneau who have the potential to become teacher leaders. However, most school reform initiatives operate by imposing a model or a script upon them and evaluating them by how faithfully they follow the program. The Writing Project model is different in that it places teachers at the center and honors them as intellectuals, creators, and leaders.

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