National Writing Project plunges teachers into specific expertise with a thorough

Immersion

BY MARY ANN SMITH

Ruth Devlin has been teaching young writers for 15 years, and she wouldn't have it any other way. The books her 2nd graders have written fill their classroom library, a testimony to her skill and dedication. Devlin is constantly on the prowl, reading her students' writing every day so she can build lessons that will move them forward. Her keen eye and her expertise have emerged over time, beginning in 1993 when she attended a summer institute at the Southern Nevada Writing Project on the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) campus, a site of the National Writing Project (NWP).

For Devlin, the five-week institute was "transforming," a word many teachers use to describe the experience of spending extended time with a group of K-12 colleagues committed to learning from each other.

In NWP, participating teachers prepare for leadership roles by demonstrating their most effective classroom practices, studying research, and improving their knowledge of writing by becoming writers themselves (National Writing Project, 2003). In Devlin's case, each of these experiences made an indelible impression on her teaching. Her writing, for example, took on a life of its own during the institute.

"I so looked forward to writing every single day. I knew I had some skills as a writer. But during the summer institute, I discovered the idea of revision. I learned I had different ways of saying things, depending on my purpose and audience. I learned that the process takes time. I learned that filling in a worksheet doesn't help you write. Now I would say that I am able to make intelligent decisions about how I work with students because I am a writer myself" (personal com-

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IN WRITING

munication, December 7, 2005).

Institute participants also give a 90-minute teaching demonstration, an eye-opening experience for every teacher in the room.

In other professions, to present a "case" before colleagues is not uncommon. But in teaching, to make public a slice of classroom practice is rare. The institute prepares teachers to articulate and interrogate their practice in a way that benefits a room full of colleagues.

Devlin's reaction to the institute demonstrations is typical: "We found out that our knowledge mattered. I had never before thought that what I knew counted for something. The demonstrations also made me look more closely at everything in my classroom, beginning with my students." At the institute, Devlin also explored theory and research in small groups with her colleagues.

"As professionals, teachers need to immerse themselves in the why as well as the what of their work," noted NWP founder James Gray (2000, p. 95).

For Devlin — who early in her career seized an unexpected invitation to become a teacher of English language learners — the institute "demanded that we read about what we were teaching. It was the first time I had read professionally in my field."

HOW THE INSTITUTE BUILDS A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

A typical day in a writing project summer institute frequently begins with the daily log — a description of the events and learning from the previous day, written in turn by each participant and shared with the entire group. Often witty and always insightful, the log is actually a model for any classroom, a way to connect the dots from day to day. Another morning ritual might be the author's chair, a literal chair in which teachers sit before the group and read

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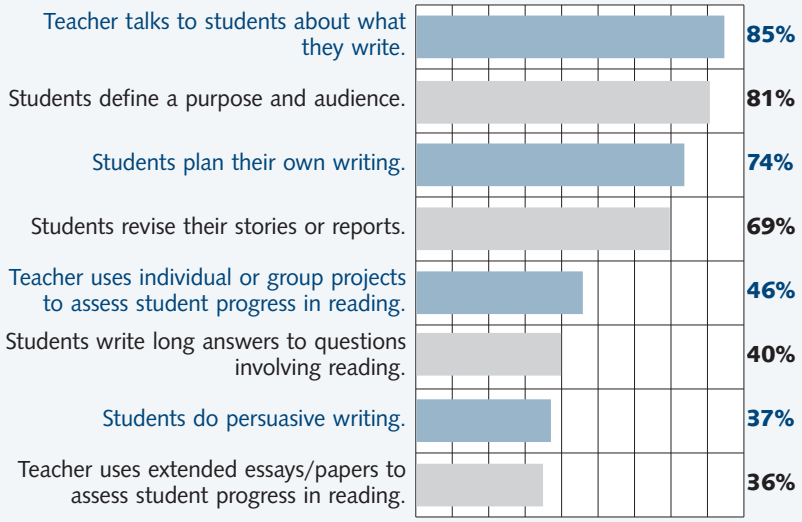
their writing. The author's chair quickly builds a feeling of community and offers a way of "publishing" writing that is, once again, also a strategy for the K-12 classroom.

The larger part of the morning is devoted to a teacher demonstration during which both the presenter and participants are learners. Before a demonstration, the teacher presenter spends two to three hours with a coach. Often the coach is a peer, someone who will listen carefully as the presenter describes a classroom-tested approach to teaching writing that has been effective with students. Coaching sessions are collegial conversations. They help both parties analyze the practice at hand and think about how to make the demonstration interactive, provocative, and open-ended. In other words, each well-coached demonstration leads participants to think about issues, questions, concerns, theories, and applications. The last 10 to 15 minutes of the allotted time is devoted to discussion and reflective writing. Presenters receive feedback in a variety of forms, from follow-up conversations with the coach to written evaluations from colleagues.

During the afternoons of the institute, teachers generally meet in small groups. Four to five teachers remain in the same writing response group for the duration of the institute, meeting up to six hours a week. They read aloud drafts of their writing — both personal and professional pieces — and give each other commendations and suggestions. The writing response groups are the most satisfying part of the institute for most participants and create deeply felt connections. Participants learn from extensive modeling and discussion in the large group how to respond to a draft — in effect, how to invest in another writer's success. Finally, at the end of the institute, teachers contribute their best pieces to an anthology.

PRACTICES FOSTERED BY THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

A 2005 study conducted by Inverness Research Associates finds that some classroom practices that are shown to correlate with higher student achievement in writing as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are practices that writing project teachers take back to their classrooms from the summer institute (Dickey, Hirabayashi, Murray, St. John, & Stokes, 2005, p.8).



Source: *The National Writing Project: Client Satisfaction and Program Impact — Results From a Satisfaction Survey and Follow-up Survey of Participants at 2004 Invitational Institutes*, by Kathleen Dickey, Judy Hirabayashi, Allison Murray, Mark St. John, and Laura Stokes, with Laurie Senauke. Inverness, CA: Inverness Research Associates.

Reading groups accomplish a different purpose. Typically, groups form by grade level (elementary, middle, high school, and college) so teachers can zero in on issues and interests that are most pertinent. Sometimes groups begin with a common reading, perhaps a book or a set of articles, followed by discussion. Individuals and groups also have opportunities to choose among various texts and to introduce them to each other. As a model to take back to the classroom, reading groups address the need to become familiar with key works and, at the same time, to become "hooked" on professional reading through discovering how much professional literature is available and how informative it can be.

The institute's three main structures — teaching demonstration, writing and response groups, and reading groups — are intended to generate and build knowledge and community among participants. Researchers Ann Lieberman and Diane Wood have also studied NWP institutes to learn how certain social practices lead to professional community. Fundamental to the NWP approach is honoring what teachers know and approaching each teacher as a potentially valuable contributor. Equally important is promoting a stance of inquiry so that questioning becomes synonymous with good teaching. The fact that questioning is a collaborative process in the institute and that institute teachers share pro-

fessional responsibility for students' learning cements the idea of a community of colleagues (Lieberman & Wood, 2003, p. 22-23).

This professional community spills over after the institute. Participants continue to work together and support each other. Throughout the year, teachers join study groups, attend seminars, and participate in online discussions.

A VIEW FROM THE CLASSROOM

Another way to examine the work of the National Writing Project is to focus on which approaches and principles take hold in the classroom. Devlin teaches at Paradise Professional Development School, a Title I school affiliated with UNLV where more than half the students are English language learners. With 12 years of writing project involvement — as a professional developer, a classroom researcher, and a new-teacher mentor — she along with her writing project colleagues across the country have distilled a number of important practices that work with students.

1. Make time for writing.

As obvious as the need for time may be, particularly in Devlin's classroom where children are learning a new language, time is actually the most precious commodity in the school day, and writing, according to the National Commission on Writing, is a "prisoner of time." In its 2003 report *The Neglected "R,"* the commission notes that "the sheer scope of skills required for effective writing is daunting. … These skills cannot be picked up from a few minutes here and a few minutes there, all stolen from more 'important' subjects." National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data reveal that in elementary school, 97% of students report spending three hours a week or less on writing assignments (National Commission on Writing, 2003, p. 20).

NWP AT A GLANCE

- Through its professional development model, the National Writing Project builds the leadership, programs, and research needed for teachers to help their students become successful writers and learners.
- Each of the 195 NWP sites conducts an annual summer institute, attended by the most experienced teachers in the area.
- Together, these teachers prepare for leadership roles by demonstrating their most effective practices, studying research, and improving their knowledge of writing by writing themselves.
- NWP sites are located on university campuses in 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, serving more than 100,000 teachers annually.
- NWP continues to add new sites each year with the goal of placing the writing project within reach of every teacher in the United States.

The problem is no less acute on the secondary level. According to *Reading Next*, a report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004), a main reason for the sharp increase in high school dropouts is that "students simply do not have the literacy skills to keep up with the high school curriculum, which has become increasingly complex."

2. Write in the content areas.

The task of writing in the content areas asks teachers to teach content knowledge and, in addition, ways of reading and writing specific to a particular discipline. History teacher Reynaldo Macias exemplifies many content area teachers who feel pressed for time — in his case, as he tries to help his students at Mark Twain Middle School in Los Angeles meet state standards. "Teaching writing and reading always seemed an additional burden," he explains. During the 2004 summer institute at the UCLA Writing Project, Reynaldo learned how to teach reading and writing to accelerate student learning. As a result, he says, "the level of thinking and discussion in my classroom is more advanced than in past years" (personal communication, October 4, 2004).

On the elementary level, teachers can weave writing into the fabric of the day. In a 2002 study of writing achievement in the classrooms of 3rd- and 4th-grade writing project teachers, evaluators from the Academy for Educational Development noted (2002, p. 17), "[A]lthough participating teachers used no single approach to writing instruction, they did reveal one common strategy: 'Writing is part of everything we do.' "

Writing is a "prisoner of time," according to the National Commission on Writing.

"When I plan what I do [in any subject], I always plan a writing component," one teacher said in the report (p. 17).

3. Select topics/create writing assignments.

Choosing topics can be difficult for students, especially if they have become dependent on the teacher as the source of all ideas. In *Teaching Writing: Balancing Process and Product,* Gail Tompkins argues that students can be stymied by "gimmicky story starters" and other teacher-generated topics. Students learn from taking some of the responsibility for selecting topics, even as

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RESEARCH ON THE IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

To illuminate teacher practices and their effect on student achievement, the National Writing Project has sponsored 13 local site research studies using quasi-experimental designs.

Pennsylvania

One site, for example, studied the outcomes of a partnership between the site and a small, rural district. The Pennsylvania Writing and Literature Project at West Chester University analyzed students' improvement in writing on measures modeled after the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment Writing Test.

- The scores of students in the writing project teachers' classes increased more than comparison group scores at all grade spans.
- Although they began the program behind the comparison group, writing project students ended it achieving above their counterparts.
- Gains for the NWP participants were 12% higher at grades 3 to 5; 39% higher at grades K and 1; and more than 150% higher at grade 2.
- These differences were statistically significant at grades K, 1, and 2, but not statistically significant in grades 3 to 5, because of smaller samples and other technical considerations (National Writing Project, 2005).

Missouri

A study by the Gateway Writing Project at the University of Missouri-St. Louis investigated a yearlong professional development program in a midsized school district. The study focused on teachers in grades 3 to 5 and the students in their classes. Matched teachers and their students provided comparison data.

- Researchers observed qualitative differences in instruction in three areas. Writing project teachers:
  1. Engaged students in a wider range of writing tasks than their counterparts;
  2. Designed more extensive writing instruction (sometimes lasting weeks or months); and
  3. Explicitly modeled reading/writing connections.
- Writing project students' scores on the district's writing assessment program increased more than those of comparison students both on the holistic assessment and on all six analytic measures (ideas, organization, voice, sentence fluency, word choice, and conventions).
- With the exception of "word choice," the differences between writing project and comparison student scores were statistically significant on all measures.
- Writing project students' scores on the Gates-MacGinitie reading test also increased more than comparison students' scores, and these differences also were statistically significant (National Writing Project, 2006).

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teachers provide them with solid guidance (2004, p. 10).

The kind of guidance teachers offer actually can improve student performance. A study by NAEP and Educational Testing Service that analyzed writing assignments from selected 4th- and 8th-grade classrooms found that effective assignments attend to four key principles:

• They engage students in such processes as reflection, analysis, and synthesis. For example, asking students to read a story and compare the motivation of two characters is a more purposeful assignment than asking students to describe one character. The latter invites a weaker response in that the student need only restate the information.

• They provide a framework (not a formula) for developing and organizing ideas. For example, a typical 4th-grade assignment — "describe your bedroom; use specific details" — lacks guidelines. Specifying the audience (perhaps a classmate) and the purpose ("describe with enough detail so that your classmate will know your interests and what's important to you") strengthens the assignment.

• They specify a real audience and a genuine opportunity to communicate. Rather than asking students to write to the teacher describing a process that is well-known to the teacher (for example, how to open a school locker), invite students to identify and write about an area of expertise not shared by a selected reader.

• They offer choice without leaving all the decisions up to the student. An effective 4th-grade assignment might be to "interview an older person at home and write the results of the interview in paragraphs. Include facts about the person's children, young adulthood, and mature adulthood and how the interviewee had fun at each stage." (National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006, pp. 46–49).

4. Respond to writing.

Devlin abides by a simple rule: "Don't throw anything out." She and her students keep writing folders in chronological order. At various points during the year, Devlin sits down with individual students and helps them put words to what they are learning. For example, a student might say, "Right now, I know I am really good at using 'describing' words, but I need to make my stories longer."

When children are able to

account for their progress, their learning becomes conscious and retrievable. By articulating which writing strategies they have added to their repertoires, they can call on these strategies at a later date. Writing becomes intentional rather than some kind of happy or unhappy accident (Smith, 1993, p. 6).

5. Teach writing (in addition to assigning it).

A teacher's time is most effectively spent teaching skills and strategies rather than correcting papers. "Writing has to be taught," Devlin insists. She uses minilessons that focus for 10 minutes on a specific strategy. For example, after reading a book to her students, Devlin might take up a challenge such as working with chronological order. But much is determined by the students themselves and by what Devlin finds when she studies their writing. "The minilesson might be about capital letters and periods when the kids fall off that wagon. Or if students are using the word 'and' between their sentences, the minilesson would demonstrate alternatives."

Teaching writing is not an easy task. Whatever they do, teachers have to make decisions based on the real children in front of them. "Genuine teaching and learning is intensely personal, not scripted," according to participants in the 2004 hearings conducted by the National Commission on Writing (in press). One participant at the hearings, David Ward, former chancellor and president of the University of Wisconsin and president of the American Council on Education, framed the challenge as "the need to customize learning in an age of standardization."

6. Stay involved with a professional community.

For Devlin and others, one answer to gaining knowledge and learning how to tailor it for their students has been their ongoing connection to their local writing project site. In addition to providing institutes and teacher-led workshops, sites of the National Writing Project also create professional communities in which teachers work together. In some cases, the reading and writing groups continue after the institute. Teachers also may gather on Saturday mornings for more teaching demonstrations, attend weekend retreats, or participate in shorter institutes on specific topics such as English language learners or assessment. Whether the gatherings are formal or informal, the idea is to extend learning beyond an initial event and to ensure that as teachers try new ways of working with students, they have colleagues to support them.

Perhaps the most important approach to teaching writing is to establish a climate in which teaching and learning can flourish. As Devlin knows, being in a teacher network such as the writing project can inspire an honest exchange among colleagues that is otherwise rare. "I feel safe asking for help," Devlin said. "I share my theories, I ask questions, I offer what I know."

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