Completing the Paradigm Shift to Process Writing: The Need to Lead

Largely as a result of the National Writing Project, thousands of teachers have been introduced to and affected by what researchers know of the best practice in the teaching of writing. Yet, according to Samuel Totten, the writing reforms that have occurred in individual classrooms have not taken hold to the point where there has been a “paradigm shift” in the way writing is taught. In this article, Totten argues that this “shift will not be made anytime soon without the full leadership, support, and resources of district and school administrators.” This piece details the steps that can make this happen.

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Twenty one years ago, Maxine Hairston, a researcher who had followed the changes taking place in the teaching of writing, published an article entitled “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing.” In this article, Hairston asked whether a “paradigm shift” was occurring in the way writing was being taught—and if so, how far this shift had gone.

Hairston argued that a new paradigm for teaching writing was, in fact, emerging, composed of twelve principle features:

1. It focuses on the writing process; instructors intervene in students’ writing during the process.
2. It teaches strategies for invention and discovery; instructors help students to generate content and discover purpose.
3. It is rhetorically based; audience, purpose, and occasion figure prominently in the assignment of writing tasks.
4. Instructors evaluate the written product by how well it fulfills the writer’s intention and meets the audience’s needs.
5. It views writing as a recursive rather than a linear press; prewriting, writing, and revision are activities that overlap and intertwine.
6. It is holistic, viewing writing as an activity that involves the intuitive and nonrational as well as the rational faculties.
7. It emphasizes that writing is a way of learning and developing as well as a communication skill.
8. It includes a variety of writing modes, expressive as well as expository.
9. It is informed by other disciplines, especially cognitive psychology and linguistics.
10. It views writing as a disciplined creative activity that can be analyzed and described; its practitioners believe that writing can be taught.
11. It is based on linguistic research and research into the composing process.
12. It stresses the principle that writing teachers should be people who write.

(124)

Most, if not all, advocates of research-based writing programs would agree that the above features are essential components in a sound writing program and,
thus, need to be an integral part of our
schools' writing programs. But are they?
In 1982, Hairston concluded that "signs of
change" were evident. Large-scale re-
search studies "whose goal was to find
practical ways to teach writing" (121)
were being conducted by an ever-
increasing number of theorists, research-
ers, and practitioners, and California's Bay
Area Writing Project and its offshoots
were influencing "a growing number of
teachers to change over to process-
centered writing instruction" (122). But,
she said, the new paradigm for teaching
writing was still at an incipient stage
(123). She recognized that, "Some of my
readers may want to protest that I am
belaboring dead issues—that the admo-
nition 'teach process not product' is now
conventional wisdom," adding, "I dis-
agree" (116). Now, over twenty years later,
it behooves educators to ask, "Have we
moved beyond this incipient stage?" If
not, why does research on best practices
in the teaching of writing continue to be
ignored by so many?

Based on my twenty-five years of experi-
ence as an English teacher in the United
States (California, New Jersey, and
Washington, D.C.), overseas (Australia and
Israel), as principal of a kindergarten
through eighth grade school in northern
California, and as a professor of education
at the University of Arkansas, I sense that,
in fact, the paradigm is shifting, but, of
course, so is the earth's crust. We are
engaged in a painfully slow process. And
the shift is far from complete.

**Process Writing: A Personal History**

Beginning my teaching career in 1976, I
knew very little to nothing of process
writing. I taught students to develop a
"solid" paragraph and then use that para-
graph as a model that could be expanded
into a five-paragraph essay. I would go
over their drafts with a fine-toothed
comb, marking errors and paying little or
no attention to voice or many of the other
concerns of real writers. The students
would be required to revise, altering
content and making other corrections as
required. This joyless routine resulted in
little improvement in their understanding
of the conventions I had so tediously
called to their attention. Nor, I fear, did I
do much to assist them in developing a
personal or effective style of writing.

By the time I reached the American
School in Israel, I was not so boxed in. I
began more whole-class sharing of
writing, and I focused my teaching more
on choice of topics, voice, and style. But
this change occurred not so much
because of any new understanding about
what the teaching of writing should be,
but more because of my assessment that
many of my students in Israel had
mastered the "basics." So when I returned
to the United States—teaching first at
Esparto High School in California and
later at a community college in New
Jersey—because students were not in
command of these fundamentals, I
reverted to the techniques of my first
years of teaching. I remained ignorant of
the process approach.

In 1981, I moved to New York City to earn
a doctorate at Columbia University
Teachers College. Here I worked with
outstanding scholars such as Ann
Lieberman, Maxine Greene, and Karen
Zunwalt. In 1985, three years after the
publication of Hairston's article, I gradu-
ated from Columbia with a doctorate in
curriculum and instruction, as blind to
the best practices of writing as when I
entered the program.

My epiphany came when, later in 1985, I
accepted the job of principal at the
Esparto Elementary/Junior High School in
Northern California. During my first few
weeks on the job, I had each teacher
conduct a writing assessment of their
students. The results were enough to
convince me that we were in trouble. I
was no expert on process writing, but I
had heard about the outstanding staff
development programs offered by the
Area 3 Writing Project site at the Univer-
sity of California, Davis, where the then
acting director, Christy Kraemer, made
clear that she could help us. We managed
to wheedle from our school board five
days off from classroom duties for our
faculty so that teacher-consultants from
the Davis site could introduce us to
writing-to-learn strategies. At the end of
those five days, few of us were profession-
ally the same.

Just before these sessions had begun, one
teacher had confronted me in the hallway
and pugnaciously told me that she had
been in the school for twenty-some years
and, no matter what I thought or had
learned in graduate school, she knew for a
fact that there was nothing new under the
sun. I got the feeling that she was not just
speaking for herself. What we all found
out at the end of those five days, however,
was that there were indeed some new
concepts under the sun. We left the
session with a beginning understanding of
the principles of process writing and with
strategies to implement these principles
in our classrooms. That summer, four
teachers and I attended the writing
project's open institute at UC Davis. It was
a stunning and eye-opening experience.
From Jayne Marlink—the institute's
director—and the Davis teacher-
consultants, we learned a whole new way
of teaching writing. Indeed, the open
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program was, for me, one of the most outstanding educational programs in which I had ever participated, including the rigorous courses I had taken at Columbia University.

But the lessons we learned that summer still need to be learned by many teachers and administrators.

Based on my work as a principal who spent many hours in teachers' classrooms, as a professor of education who has observed hundreds of teachers in elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools, and as director of the Northwest Arkansas Writing Project, I am aware of a disconnect. I know that while national educational organizations (most notably the National Council of Teachers of English) consider process writing to be the most efficacious way to teach writing, this organizational stance does not necessarily carry over into the classrooms of all English teachers, and even less into the classrooms of those who teach social studies, mathematics, and science. I believe there are two primary reasons for this.

First, many colleges of education do not offer, let alone require, courses that focus on the most effective ways to teach writing. Second—and this is the focus of this article—there is a dire lack of knowledge by many school board members, superintendents, assistant superintendents of instruction, curriculum coordinators, principals, and assistant principals as to what needs to be done to develop and nurture a community of writing teachers who are knowledgeable about ways to effectively advance the teaching of process writing.

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An Unscientific but Telling Picture of the Status of a “Paradigm Shift” from Product to Process Writing

In 2002, I attempted to get a glimmer of the extent to which Hairston’s paradigm just focusing on the mechanics in writing, now I will help my students experience the joy of writing.” Here, a teacher who has taught for over two decades finally recognizes that correcting mechanical errors is not the end-all-and-be-all of preparing students to become writers. Rather, she now seems to understand that teaching writing should, at a minimum, lead students toward invention and discovery.

A high school English teacher with ten years of experience asserted “[Now I realize] that I should engage my students in more writing and not focus solely on one specific form.” This teacher implies that she plans to move from engaging her students solely in expository writing to the “variety of writing modes” that are central to the writing process paradigm that Hairston delineated in her essay.

Reported a second grade teacher with twenty-five years of experience:

The past nine days have been packed with eye-opening experiences. I’ve learned how important prewriting activities are for students. I’ve learned writing and sharing can be fun. Probably most important, I’ve been able to allow the writer inside me to begin to come alive. This one thing will drive my teaching more than anything. Now that I know myself as a writer, I will be better able to teach writing.

Teachers who do not consider themselves writers are bound, at one time or another, to wonder, “What am I doing teaching writing?” Now, having been deeply
engaged in our summer institute’s various activities, this particular teacher has begun to understand that writers are made, not born.

Another participant, a fourth grade teacher with six years of experience, wrote:

*Teaching my students to write has always seemed like one of life’s greatest mysteries. I would almost compare it to standing my students in front of an airplane and saying ‘Okay, fly it.’ Now I want the project they are working on to be important to them. That little insightful fact had never even crossed my mind before. I’ve been guilty of assigning a writing project and then returning to my desk to grade papers or plan lessons. I see now that I need to be an example for my students. I need to model the process for them.*

This teacher, who had long thought that the teaching of writing is nothing short of a mystery, now not only understands that writing can be taught but also is beginning to understand how it can be taught. It seems that the real mystery about teaching writing is this: Why is it that twenty years after Hairston detailed the paradigm shift toward process writing, these teachers—and possibly thousands like them—are still ignorant of best practice in the teaching of writing?

Since the establishment of our NWP site in 1997, I have, of course, worked with another group of teachers, those we recruit for our summer invitational institutes. As at every writing project site, these teachers are chosen to attend the institute based on their performance as outstanding teachers, many of whom are identified as exemplary teachers of writing. Given this select population, one might expect a high degree of understanding of and involvement with the concepts Hairston described. In fact, less than a quarter of the teachers involved in our six invitational summer institutes have indicated that they were extremely knowledgeable about the latest theory and research on the teaching of writing. Those that were well informed had either been introduced to the theory and research in Northwest Arkansas Writing Project inservices, miniconferences, or the open summer institutes or, more generally, undertook studies of their own in an effort to become well-informed professionals.

At last year’s invitational summer institute, we held a discussion on the paradigm shift. A slight majority of the participants argued that, yes, there had been a paradigm shift, but ultimately the discussion revealed that those who claimed this shift had occurred were basing this perception on their own classroom practices and those of a few close colleagues. During the discussion, we learned that only one of the participants had taken a course on teaching writing while earning her undergraduate degree and teaching credential. A majority stated that their principals focused on the need to increase student test scores on the writing component of standardized tests, but that these administrators offered no staff development and never commented on best practices of writing. Close to half of the group stated that the only writing-related staff development they had experienced was something called “Step-Up to Writing,” which they described as a formulaic, lock-step approach to teaching expository writing through the use of colored strips (e.g., red for the introductory sentence, green for supporting materials, etc.). The participants at the secondary level stated that, at their schools, only the English teachers were expected to hold students responsible for their writing. Finally, more than three-quarters of these fellows admitted that they rarely used response groups in their classes, primarily because they weren’t sure how to employ them in an effective manner.

Eventually, we unanimously concluded that a paradigm shift was not evident in northwest Arkansas.

**Shifting the Paradigm: What Else Is Needed?**

I believe that numerous features must be evident in the culture of schools if the paradigm shift in the teaching of writing is finally to take place. Here are a few:

- Every school’s goals and objectives must include process writing as a basic concept for writing to learn in every discipline.
- Before teachers or principals implement a new writing program, they need a strong theoretical and research-based understanding of best practices in writing, as well as the know-how to implement change. In other words, they need to understand what they are doing.
- Each school’s teacher evaluation plan must reflect the importance of the use of writing-to-learn in every discipline.
- Superintendents, assistant superintendents of curriculum and instruction, curriculum coordinators, and site administrators must be required by the school boards that hire them to work with teachers to develop and implement theoretically sound and research-based staff development programs on writing-to-learn across the curriculum.
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- As the instructional leader of the school site, each principal must be held accountable for assuring that writing-to-learn is an integral part of the school curriculum and is implemented, thoroughly and effectively, by every teacher in the school.
- When teachers are hired by a district, they should be selected, in part, for their knowledge base and degree of skill in applying best practices of writing.
- Finally, school boards and school administrators within a district must place pressure on their state department of education to prod schools of education to thoroughly prepare their preservice students to incorporate writing to learn practices across the curriculum.

This is, of course, a pretty heavy dose of accountability. And one might ask who exactly is going to hold these folks accountable? Before accountability must come commitment, and no one in the educational hierarchy should be expected to promote and hold others accountable for implementing ideas to which they themselves are not committed.

That's why there is a critical need for the National Writing Project to develop its own sustained and effective effort to inform state departments of education, school boards, superintendents, assistant superintendents of instruction, and principals about the latest research on teaching writing, and, ultimately, to convince them of the significance of preparing teachers to implement research-based best practices in writing. Further, leaders need to be convinced that the most likely way in which best practices in writing will become the new paradigm within their states, districts, and schools is through sustained and high-quality staff development on process writing. Central office and site administrators need to appreciate and then act upon the fact that “staff development cannot be separated from school development” (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 331). Put another way, the type and quality of staff development directly and dramatically impacts the culture of the school, the quality of the school's curriculum and instruction program, and what the students learn and do not learn.

The Dos and Don'ts of Staff Development—What Administrators Need to Know

Those involved in the National Writing Project know that knowledgeable and passionate teachers teaching teachers provide one of the most effective ways for educators to learn new ideas and strategies for implementation in their classrooms. They also know that when teachers are empowered to be leaders of the instructional process, they are more likely to continue to learn more about their craft and that this knowledge will impact student learning in positive ways.

As described in their article “Why Change Doesn't Happen and How to Make Sure It Does,” Chuck J. Schwahn and William G. Spady note that in their work with hundreds of schools over the past decade, they observed five interdependent reasons why productive change doesn't happen. They have developed “change rules” that suggest what change agents need to be conversant with if they hope to bring about successful change in a school setting. I want to look at these “rules” specifically as they might help a school make real progress toward a process-oriented paradigm change.

“Change Rule 1: People don't change unless they share a compelling reason to change” (45). Principals need to understand that teachers with harried schedules and heavy demands will not change the way they teach writing and/or use writing unless they have been introduced to the theory and research that make such a change seem rational and necessary. Many teachers know that much of what they are doing isn't working. A well-designed inservice program will make clear the benefits of a shift toward a process-writing and writing-to-learn paradigm.

“Change Rule 2: People don't change unless they have ownership in the change” (46). Far too often, the focus of an inservice program is selected (or, as teachers often feel, dictated) by school or district personnel other than those for whom the inservice is intended. At a minimum, teachers need a voice in regard to the topics and focus of the inservice. Ideally, the inservice sessions should be developed around those aspects of teaching writing that teachers find most difficult to teach, for instance, effective writing-to-learn strategies across the curriculum, ideas for helping students incorporate voice into their writing, and those aspects with which students have the most difficulty, such as proper use of grammatical conventions.

“Change Rule 3: People don't change unless their leaders model that they are serious about the change” (46). The importance of this rule cannot be emphasized too strongly. It encompasses all of the following: 1) Principals need to be cognizant of and conversant with cutting-edge programs such as process writing, writing to learn, and all that they entail. 2) Principals need to be cheerleaders of
change, and thus advocates for the introduction of top-notch inservice programs. 3) Principals need to remember that “actions speak louder than words,” and thus it behooves them to take part, regularly, in all inservice programs. For example, if the school is hosting a writing project inservice, the principal needs to write, share, and respond to others’ writing. By taking part in or not taking part in an inservice program, a principal telegraphs the true value she places on staff development. 4) The principal must advocate sustained, well-conceptualized, research-based programs that provide follow-up support for ideas and practices introduced in inservice programs. 5) Principals, along with their teachers, need to tie the focus of the inservice to the evaluation process. Thus, evidence that teachers are incorporating best practices in the area of writing ought to be collected and examined through classroom observations, the display of student work, and, once the program has been solidified, via research.

“Change Rule 4: People are unlikely to change unless they have a concrete picture of what the change will look like for them personally” (47). The best way for teachers to understand a move toward a “paradigm” shift is to experience the change themselves through research-based, hands-on, minds-on inservice on teaching writing. Furthermore, teachers need a clear understanding of what it is going to take to implement the expected changes. If these changes are overwhelming, there is a good chance that the innovation will fail.

A key practice of most, if not all, NWP inservice sessions is to ask the teachers to implement one change at a time, choosing a change, task, or strategy that has a high likelihood of success. Concomitantly, teachers are asked to try out the strategy and succinctly document what worked, why they think that is so, the reaction of the students, the quality of the student work, and any difficulties or barriers they, the teachers, faced as they tested the strategy. In a subsequent inservice session, the teachers’ reports are discussed and addressed, and the teacher-consultant acts, in concert with the insights and suggestions of the rest of the participants, as a troubleshooter. This support system increases the likelihood that not only will the initial strategies be implemented, but that teachers will be open to testing out additional strategies.

“Change Rule 5: People can’t make a change—or make it last—unless they receive organizational support for the change” (47). Follow-up support for ideas and practices introduced in process writing inservice programs is critical. Ultimately, principals must allocate critical resources to support the teachers’ efforts (e.g., funds to bring in high-quality, intensive inservice programs that are sustained over the long haul and that provide for technical assistance, and/or for sending teachers for advanced preparation at venues such as the NWP summer institutes.) Ideally, the principal also needs to provide release time for teachers to collaborate and plan lessons and observe one another teaching.

Ultimately, it is imperative that all parties involved in the staff development effort be cognizant of the fact that “If [an inservice is solely comprised of] providing for theoretical understanding, demonstration, and initial practice, fewer than 10 percent of the teachers will be able to engage in enough practice to add the new procedures to their repertoires (Joyce and Showers). The point is, ongoing and intensive research-based staff development is imperative.

As I’ve tried to make clear, the type of staff development advocated and largely practiced by the National Writing Project and its affiliates across the nation avoids the failure common to many staff development efforts. Through the work of the writing project, thousands of teachers have been introduced to and have had a chance to apply classroom practices based on the breakthrough ideas Hairston delineated over twenty years ago.

The question, though, remains: Do the majority of school boards, superintendents, assistant superintendents of instruction, and site administrators understand the power of these ideas? The answer to that largely rhetorical question must be an obvious No! For if there were such recognition, would not more school districts opt for such staff development continued on page 38
sleek high-tech computers, are much like
the workbooks used by earlier genera-
tions. In general, “old wine in new bottles”
seems to sum up the situation.

Because of tradition, it seems part of the
natural order that all writing deserves a
grade. We rationalize, for example, that we
don’t want students practicing mistakes.
And perhaps because of past experience,
we worry that students will simply ignore
our ungraded tasks. The possible loss of
control may make us shudder.

But schools are the way they are because
we make them that way. If the desks are in
rows rather than a student-friendly U
shape, it may be because we doubt our
own powers to shape the environment for
productive dialogue. And if we refuse to
consider ungraded writing-to-learn
activities like the ones above, it may be
because we’re reluctant to question our
own practices or because we doubt our
skills in implementing forward-thinking
ideas. After all, it takes courage to teach.

My hope is that as we forego grading in
favor of learning—using frequent
writing-to-learn activities as our versatile
tool—we’ll discover a powerful antidote
to the mind-numbing effects of writing’s
hidden curriculum.

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now celebrating its twenty-fifth year. His most
recent book is Coaching Writing: The Power of
Guided Practice (Heinemann 2001).

and also be closer to realizing the shift
from product to process in teaching and
using writing in the classroom?

Recommendations
The following are recommendations for
the National Writing Project and its 178
NWP sites to consider as they continue
their vital work in shifting the writing
paradigm from one of product to process:

• Develop special programs that target
school board members, superinten-
dents, assistant superintendents of
instruction, curriculum coordinators,
and site administrators to educate them
about process writing, the power of
writing-to-learn strategies across the
curriculum, effective staff development,
and the change process.

• Develop special programs that assist
central office administrators, site
administrators, and teachers to tie the
implementation of a writing program
to the evaluation process of all parties.

• Encourage writing project sites to
recruit more district and school
administrators to both their open and
invitational summer institutes.

• Offer special sessions at the NWP
Annual Meeting (led by NWP personnel
and site administrators) to assist NWP
directors and co-directors in develop-
ing strategies for getting their local
school districts to buy into the need for
the paradigm shift.

• In conjunction with the National School
Board Association (NSBA) and the
National Council of Teachers of English
(NCTE), the NWP should consider
issuing annual awards to school
districts in which best practices in the

Conclusion
A paradigm shift will not be made
anytime soon without the full leadership,
support, and resources of district and
school administrators. No single group of
individuals—be it teachers or adminis-
trators—has the power or the means to
make this shift on its own; the change
must be a collective effort, and without
such an effort, we face a collective failure.
Many thousands of teachers across the
nation are leading the way; today it is time
for school administrators to truly lead by
joining in the effort.

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