Documenting the Real Work of School Reform with the NWP at Work Series

The National Writing Project is a big idea—teachers teaching teachers—that gains its strength from a collection of smaller ideas. This is the rationale for a new series of monographs, National Writing Project at Work. Each volume in the series groups several monographs that focus on a single subject essential to the writing project’s work. In this article, Joye Alberts and Elizabeth Radin Simons describe the evolution of the first monograph collection, Models of Inservice, and provide excerpts from each of the essays.

Compiled by Joye Alberts and Elizabeth Radin Simons

Over the last few years, teams of teacher-consultants and site directors have been documenting their work at local sites as part of a new publication series known as National Writing Project at Work. The series marks a new approach by the National Writing Project (NWP) to making site-based knowledge available to site leaders and external audiences interested in NWP programs.

NWP at Work debuted in the fall of 2002 with four monographs, each describing an effective professional development model that has been created with great ingenuity and refined over time, and each drawing on the experience and wisdom of teachers and directors. Written by local site leaders for a primary audience of site leaders who might be interested in adapting or replicating the programs described, the monographs are honest, interesting, and full of practical information. Each piece gives a window into the complexity of teachers’ needs and interests, and into the challenges of designing relevant professional development that supports teachers’ efforts to improve learning for all students, especially for underserved students in urban and rural schools.

The goal of the series is to capture the work of sites, much of which is undocumented and typically disseminated only informally by word of mouth or in workshops, in a manner that is substantive and easily accessible. To make this happen, teams of writers from selected sites have worked closely with Elizabeth Radin Simons, developmental editor of the series, to document these exemplary projects and programs.

What follows is a short excerpt from each of the first four monographs in Models of Inservice, volume 1 of the NWP at Work series. These short samples do not begin to reflect the scope of the monographs. Rather, they offer a glimpse into the rich resources available in each piece. The foreword captures a sense of the reality that monograph readers will find:

Professional development of teachers is a pivotal component of school reform, and teacher voices are critical for this work to be successful. In these monographs, we hear why and when teachers commit to this work, what it does for them as educators, and how it helps change their professional self-images. We learn the authors’ ideas behind their designs for reform, their grassroots theories about what it takes to transform school culture, teaching, and learning, and what support they need to do this work. The monographs show how school reform happens—how in a multitude of ways, large and small, in schools across the country, teachers make it work. (iii)

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The Story of SCORE: The Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute Takes on a Statewide Reading Initiative by Lynette Herring-Harris and Cassandra Hansbrough, Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute, describes the process of developing and
implementing an inservice model that teaches secondary teachers of all subjects how to support their students as readers. In the following excerpt, Herring-Harris describes the initial leadership team planning process as the Secondary Content Opening to Reading Excellence (SCORE) program was being developed. She writes:

"...we [the leadership team] brainstormed how we might change attitudes about reading at the secondary level and outlined six days of inservice. We decided that days one and two would begin to address attitudes and beliefs about reading as well as introduce reading strategies. Days three and four would occur approximately five weeks after the first two days. In the weeks between sessions, participants would experience, absorb, and use the informational reading and writing strategies modeled. More importantly, workshop participants would have time to reflect on their own reading practices and the effectiveness of the strategies in their classrooms. Everyone at the workshop would be asked to gather student samples resulting from the modeled strategies. These samples would be analyzed at each follow-up session.

Days five and six would be five to six weeks after days three and four. In these last two days of the series, workshop participants would use Socratic seminars, a strategy for structuring scholarly classroom discussions in which all participants take an active role, to begin professional conversations about the reading process and how their classrooms were changing. The workshop would end with a final session where participants would share a school project based on strategies learned in the series."

Jumping ahead, Cassandra Hansbrough describes the beginning day of the inservice program:

"Wayne McLeod and I arrived at the Greensboro Center in Starkville in March geared up to convince secondary content-area teachers and administrators to see reading with new eyes. I was the teacher-leader, and Wayne, a retired administrator, was the administrator-leader. Wayne and I would lead all five sessions in the series but would be joined by content-area specialist presenters on days three and four. We had four goals for the first day: to introduce the importance of reading in secondary school, to help participants see the impact reading strategies could have in content-area classrooms, to start the participants thinking about how they could integrate high-interest reading material in subject areas, and to show reading as an instrumental part of the subject-area frameworks."

To raise consciousness about the role of reading across the curriculum, Wayne and I began by asking participants to think about what an ideal education would look like for their students. We also asked them to write a letter to a memorable student describing their hopes and dreams for the student. Working in small groups, they shared their ideas and their letters and made group charts of their “description of an ideal education” and “hopes and dreams for our students.” As we analyzed each group’s chart, we realized that all the goals were directly or indirectly impacted by a student’s ability to read. Participants began to think more about the role reading played in all classes and began to consider the notion that perhaps all teachers, by necessity, were reading teachers. Toward the end of the day, Wayne and I asked participants to browse through their subject-area frameworks and see which concepts were covered in the activities we had done. They seemed amazed when they realized several of their content-area concepts and objectives were covered. This connecting of reading to content-area frameworks helped more participants see the importance of reading in their areas and helped us make the point that SCORE reading strategies would benefit all subjects. (14-15)

The monograph goes on to describe the five days of SCORE training and share lessons learned from the project as well as resources that offer approaches to reading instruction in secondary content areas.

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The Johnston Area Writing Partnership: The Capital Area Writing Project Model for Building District Capacity to Offer Quality Professional Development, by Ruie Pritchard, Sandra O’Berry, and Patsy Butler from the Capital Area Writing Project in North Carolina, describes a long-term partnership between an NWP site and a district-based writing partnership created and sustained by writing project teacher-consultants. Readers of this monograph will appreciate both the lively narrative and the twenty-plus pages of appendices that include a sample needs
assessment, prompts for focus-group discussions, and evaluation tools.

The following excerpt is taken from the end of the monograph as the authors reflect on the success of their partnership:

One reason for our success is our support networks and collaborations, both local and national. Because we banded together in a partnership that included people outside our district and created an in-district network, we have accomplished a great deal in a short time. JAWP [Johnson Area Writing Partnership] would have long ago drained our energy and resources if we had not built support networks with CAWP [Capital Area Writing Project] and with NWP teachers in other sites. Nationally, new understanding and motivation came from JAWP leaders interacting with the participants at the Project Outreach Network summer institute, working with the national coordinators, and attending and presenting at the national conferences of NWP and NCTE. (17)

The authors are honest about the challenges to the future of JAWP’s intensive, teacher-led programs:

The first challenge is to build ongoing local teacher leadership. Other trained JAWP teachers must step up to the plate and take on various responsibilities. Collaboration with CAWP veterans in other districts, such as the Durham Public Schools, is being explored for possibilities of mutual support and an exchange of teacher-consultants.

The second challenge is for ongoing financial support and more broad-based district support. . . . JAWP competes with many other initiatives for time and space. JAWP still needs a designated line item in the budget that assures that support will be ongoing; concerted efforts by the district for job-embedded follow-up; released time for teachers . . . who take on substantial leadership roles; trained principals who support and recognize good writing instruction; and, finally, a central-office administrator who advocates the JAWP cause to the superintendent and the school board. (19)

Finally, the authors offer the following recommendations to others interested in designing a similar initiative:

- Start with a writing advisory committee that includes representatives from the district’s central office and from the area NWP site.
- Form a network across schools within your district.
- Establish a support system outside the district. Elicit the help of your area NWP site. Ask for advanced workshops or seminars on topics that will develop teacher-leaders. Ask for the help of NWP teacher-consultants from other districts who can come to your site.
- Define yourself: create a mission statement, a vision statement, and an action plan to remind you of your purpose and direction. Return to these and update them.
- Tie your mission and vision directly to that of your district; renegade projects do not succeed in public schools.
- Include district administration in your planning stages; make sure that all stakeholders are involved.
- Gather data. Data should include: information from initial and follow-up needs assessments; numbers of participants in summer trainings; attendance at school-year staff development; amount of outside funding; workshop evaluations; correspondence with and recommendations to central office; articles in newspapers and journals; standardized test scores; teacher testimonials; student portfolios; etc.
- Make yourself visible. Advertise your initiative to your community and to your district administration. Create a brochure. Get a “good-press-for-teachers” type of article in your local paper. Write articles for The Voice, The Quarterly, and other professional journals. Copy them to your administrators when they are published. Get on the program of regional, state, and national conferences. Ask to speak at district meetings of principals. Get on the agenda for a school board meeting or PTA meeting. Make an appointment with the superintendent. Don’t be humble or work in silence!
- Apply for funding. Use your visibility and data to apply for grants, large and small. Tie all this money together under the auspices of your writing partnership. Don’t forget to drop names if you have well-known connections.
- Advocate for job-embedded professional development for teachers. Cite research that shows: effective staff development is ongoing and job embedded, not something “extra” expected of teachers; administrators, especially principals, need to be involved in ongoing training; a corps of skilled teacher-trainers should be supported by a central office that has a primary job of serving the professional needs of teachers.
- And don’t forget: provide good refreshments for your staff development sessions, and celebrate the “bright ideas” of your colleagues! (20-21)

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NWP sites across the country develop inservice programs appropriate for their varied contexts. The models described in the NWP at Work series reflect the diversity of approaches to inservice. The Fledgling Years: Lessons from the First Four Years of the National Writing Project in Vermont, by Patricia McGonegal and Anne Watson of the National Writing Project in Vermont, describes the site’s beginnings as an inservice provider. In the
following excerpt, site director McGonegal remembers:

After the first institute, we hoped to re-create, in our inservice series for other Vermont teachers, the spirit and the achievement of those four weeks. In the fall of 1996, we began our first inservice sessions at two elementary schools in northern Vermont. Teacher participants were enthusiastic and involved. The next year we doubled the number of school series, bringing in more teacher-consultants from our summer institutes as coordinators and presenters. We began a collaboration with the Vermont Council of Teachers of English, cosponsoring a Saturday session at a local hotel, offering teachers from across the state a taste of [National Writing Project in Vermont].

We set out to sell the NWP Basic Assumptions to our schools. Some of these assumptions were more easily sold than others. Inservice Program Coordinator Anne Watson and I emphasized to school leaders the need for ongoing contact. Few would dispute that professional development writing programs need to be ongoing, consistent, and provide opportunities for teachers and students to practice writing over a period of time. The word time is pivotal. In Vermont, as elsewhere, teachers and students are expected to demonstrate immediate results in writing with little opportunity to practice. Writer, teacher, and author Natalie Goldberg states, “It is odd that we never question the feasibility of a football team practicing long hours for one game; yet in writing, we rarely give ourselves the space to practice.” Nor do we have classrooms where teachers readily practice writing along with their students.

... our [inservice] sessions gave teachers more than the usual workshop. There was a piece of classroom practice involved, but it was tied to theory, as writer Ann Bertoff suggests it always should be. She quotes a colleague who was asked for a copy of a successful exercise and who replied, “Sure, [you can have my recipe], but you have to take the theory, too.”

Our first inservice coordinators struggled with the question of proportion. What should our assignments and expectations be? We had assigned whole books at the summer institute. This was too much to try at a series of three-hour, after-school sessions, so our teacher-consultants found one-page articles by Donald Graves and Donald Murray. They also asked teachers to find readings to share as well. The rich response to this request taught us an important lesson, one that we might have learned at the institute: If we do too much for the participants, they become consumers only. Asking them to bring nourishment to the sessions—food, theory, experience—is key to a successful experience. I like the image of an inservice workshop as a ball game of some kind: I handle things for a while, then toss the ball to the participants. In order to put the ball in their court as early as possible in a session, I always ask the participants a question, or for journal writing, or introductions, or small group discussion. Back and forth. I always know where we are going, but share the floor and leave room for spontaneity. Turning over much of the responsibility, activity, and even supplies we consume at a session invites buy-in, engagement, power, and responsibility. When we do it all ourselves, in the spirit of “you people are tired, and overworked; we’ll feed you, and we’ll decide what you will do, think, and read,” we see many more folded arms and less interest from the teachers. (6-7)

The Fledgling Years goes on to offer information about funding and organizing inservice and partnerships, with a particular focus, provided by inservice coordinator Anne Watson, on the site’s inservice experience in two Vermont schools.

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On-Site Consulting: New York City Writing Project, by Nancy Mintz and Alan L. Stein with an introduction by Marcie Wolfe, provides a glimpse into the long-term, school-based approach to school reform that has been at the heart of the work of the New York City Writing Project (NYCWP) since 1981. The monograph includes two stories: Nancy Mintz’s multiyear collaboration with one middle school teacher and Alan Stein’s collaboration with teachers and the principal to develop a new school culture. The following excerpts from the introductions to both pieces hint at the rich stories shared by each author. The first is from “Developing Collaborative Relationships in a School Setting: Taking an Inquiry Stance in Professional Development,” by Mintz.

In 1996, I left the classroom to work for the NYCWP as an on-site teacher-consultant in New York City middle school classrooms. This is the story of how I faced a central dilemma of my new role: bringing my twenty-eight years of classroom experience to bear on my work with
teachers in their classrooms while at the same time stepping back in order to let them learn. From my perspective, it is a story about learning to enact, in a new setting, my belief that teaching is a kind of collaboration. As a new consultant, I needed to learn how to support teachers as they worked on integrating unfamiliar writing and literacy practices into their very real classroom settings. I had many questions: How do I help teachers take risks and expand their practices? How do I develop relationships that are truly collaborative? How do I avoid the image of "outside expert" while translating all I know and value from my experience teaching children, so it appropriately fits with this new kind of teaching? How do I stay true to the things that I value, while working in schools where contrary values predominate?

Over the past four years, I have learned a great deal about myself and about what it means to work in collaboration with other professionals in their school and classroom settings. Consulting has been interesting and difficult to learn, and as with each group of students l've taught, each teacher I work alongside has his or her own style and way of being in the classroom. I have had to learn that it is not about making them into teachers like me, but helping them to discover who they are as they integrate more reading and writing into their existing curriculum. (5)

In part two of the monograph, "Whole School Reform: A Collaboration Between a Teacher-Consultant and a Principal," Alan Stein introduces his long-term work at New York's Erasmus Hall High School:

...For the last five years, I have been a consultant at the Erasmus Hall Campus School for Humanities and Performing Arts, one of the city's most difficult schools. It was there that I forged a partnership with the principal, Carol Wagner, there that I found myself in the position of learner as well as innovator, and there that I engaged the issue of whole-school reform for the first time. I had believed previously that if I worked with teachers on using writing as a tool for learning and thinking, the teachers collectively would have an impact on the whole school. When I began at Erasmus Humanities, it was a school on the verge of extinction and required wholesale restructuring to survive and serve its students. In working with teachers and in identifying leaders who might help to bring about reform, the principal (along with a handful of teachers) turned out to be the key element. That was all very new to me.

This monograph is a narrative of a school under siege, a school that was fortunate to have a principal who had a vision of change that was aligned with the beliefs of the New York City Writing Project. My first year (1995-1996), I spent many hours observing, got to know the principal, and began to see what kind of work I could do. The second year (1996-1997), my work received the support of the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund Students at the Center (SATIC) grant, allowing me to spend sometimes as many as four days per week at the school and help to put in place structures that would develop and take root in the next three years, sometimes in very unpredictable ways. (21)

Both pieces of the monograph offer a rich description of the inservice challenges and how the New York City Writing Project model has addressed them. As director Marcie Wolfe writes in her introduction to the monograph, "Alan's and Nancy's work depict the careful attention, knowledge, and flexibility that are the hallmarks of all NYCWP teacher-consultants as they collaborate with teachers, students, and school leaders to foster instructional change" (4).

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Copies of the monographs can be downloaded or ordered—at no cost—via the National Writing Project website at www.writingproject.org/Publications. The second set in the Models of Inservice volume will be available this winter and will include descriptions of inservice models developed by the Great Basin Writing Project (Nevada), the Kennesaw Mountain Writing Project (Georgia), the Oklahoma State University Writing Project, and the Saginaw Valley National Writing Project.

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