Walking in Our Students’ Shoes: Reading Teachers and the Writing Project Model

Teachers of writing should write. This is a core belief of the National Writing Project. It is the rationale behind the fact that many hours of the NWP summer institutes are devoted to teachers practicing the skills they will bring to their students in the fall. In this article, Peter Kittle demonstrates that reading teachers—in all disciplines—also can move from learning and practicing new reading strategies to advancing these ways of learning in their classrooms.

Peter Kittle

The cliché says that you can’t teach old dogs new tricks. The teaching profession, with its seemingly endless stream of imposed changes—everything from state content standards to new requirements for complying with the No Child Left Behind regulations—would seem to be the least-favored occupation for old dogs. Those of us who teach know how to be flexible, how to adapt, how to make ourselves over in the image of the newest mandates from above. But these makeovers are often merely cosmetic in nature. After all, those who impose new standards aren’t in a position to know a specific school’s needs, much less a certain teacher’s classroom population, so it should come as no surprise if teachers don’t wholeheartedly embrace mandated changes.

This poses a particular difficulty for those of us who conduct professional development workshops. As teachers, we’ve been exposed to many outsiders who come in, give a spiel about the latest and greatest methods or ideas, and then disappear. We seldom have the opportunity to play with ideas over time, reflect upon their efficacy, and report back to others on our results. I have been lucky enough to codirect a professional development program that, due to its content, structure, and the high level of engagement from participants, avoided many of the hit-and-run pitfalls described above. In this article, I will detail the elements that helped this program, the California Professional Development Institute (CPDI), succeed.

Ironically, the CPDI program began precisely as a top-down, let’s-fix-those-broken-teachers program put in place by politicians and bureaucrats. Former Governor Gray Davis initially made the bold claim that CPDIs would retrain 100,000 poorly-prepared high-school English teachers—even though there are fewer than 70,000 English teachers in all of California. The CPDI program mandated eighty contact hours, with an additional forty hours of independent school site work. The CPDIs’ charge was to improve teachers’ abilities to deliver the state-mandated content standards in English language arts, which included the ability to read and synthesize numerous writers’ ideas and perspectives and critically write in response to multiple texts. Because these essential literacy skills dovetail with basic writing project goals, the California Writing Project (CWP) was one of the organizations selected to administer CPDIs through the CWP regional network. At the Northern California Writing Project’s CPDI, participants were welcomed from across disciplines in the belief that “the literacy practices must be taught in all subjects.”

My involvement with the CPDI program began when Rochelle Ramay, co-director of the Northern California Writing Project, invited me to codirect a new institute in Redding, a small city about seventy miles north of Chico, where I teach in California State University’s English Education program. I was excited at the prospect of meeting and working with teachers outside Chico’s somewhat
insular, college-town environment. The opportunity to work with Rochelle, who chairs the English Department at rural Corning High School and directs teacher research at our writing project site, was also appealing. A smart, committed teacher, Rochelle is a dynamic individual, a veteran inservice provider, and an accomplished professional. I knew I would learn much from collaborating with her.

The participants in our CPDI were, I imagine, markedly different from those underprepared teachers the governor targeted. Unlike the highly-populated urban areas of Southern California, the Bay Area, and greater Sacramento, the nine-county service area of our writing project site is mostly rural. Our region has been less affected by growth and sudden increases in student populations than other areas of California. Hence, most classroom teachers here are fully certified. Despite a paucity of underprepared teachers, we had no trouble finding teachers interested in improving their students’ abilities in reading and writing.

CPDI participants came both from large high schools in Redding as well as much smaller schools nestled in the rural and mountainous communities of Northern California. Along with the expected group of English teachers—around half of the 25 participants—we had teachers of art, social studies, science, math, special education, even metal shop. Some teachers made multihour commutes just to attend the sessions, which lasted four hours on Friday nights and all day Saturdays. We met two successive weekends each month, December through March. For this, each participant received a $1,000 stipend and was eligible for six units of professional development credit. Although these were certainly nice incentives, few of the teachers seemed to be there just for the external rewards. Rather, we all seemed reading apprenticeship program, while Karen Feathers’ Infotext: Reading and Learning focuses on the reading of informational materials like textbooks and workplace and consumer documents. Cris Tovani’s I Read It, But I Don’t Get It details the author’s struggles and successes in teaching reluctant adolescent readers in Colorado; Jim Burke’s The English Teacher’s Companion similarly describes Burke’s work with Bay Area students of all abilities. With the exception of Burke’s book, the texts are discipline independent, examining the practices of successful readers and describing models of instruction that can help students attain those practices.

We also disbursed a binder containing brief summaries of various reading and writing strategies culled from books, as well as miscellaneous readings for use in practicing the strategies. We endeared ourselves to most participants by freely distributing office supplies like Post-it Notes, highlighters, and message flags. Our objective was to give participants the tools—pedagogical, material, and experiential—they would need to create, teach, and evaluate an “assignment sequence” that would begin with reading and end with writing. Before asking participants to do this themselves, we wanted to provide a variety of scaffolding experiences. We wanted them to take a walk in their students’ shoes, so to speak, by asking them to do the kinds of literacy tasks they regularly asked their own students to complete. With this in mind, the CPDI began with a model assignment sequence that required the participants to read

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multiple, related academic texts and then write critical, engaged essays in response to the ideas in the texts.

We began our model assignment sequence with the basics: selecting a general topic. We chose education as a common touchstone for all participants and picked diverse readings on the subject. The readings ranged from engaging, provocative narratives by Jim Gray and Mike Rose to a complicated, convoluted essay by John Dewey. We included for good measure thoughtful and reflective pieces by E. B. White and Theodore Sizer. The readings reflected the same diversity of text—in terms of level of interest, ease of navigation, complexity of argument, and difficulty of vocabulary—that high school students would be likely to come across over the course of a school year. In having participants read these pieces, we wanted them to experience again the feeling of being confused and intimidated by text in order to empathize with their students' encounters with reading.

It's easy to forget that something like the related themes of idealism and naiveté in *Julius Caesar*—which are obvious to the teacher who has taught the play twice a year for a decade—might not jump out at a novice reader of Shakespeare. The same could be said for reading a history, science, or any other discipline-specific textbook: teachers of these subjects know how to read and make sense of them. The difficulty lies in figuring out how to tell our students how we construct meaning when we read these things, probably because we are often unconscious of our own processes of reading. Requiring CPDI participants to read unfamiliar and challenging material, in conjunction with strategies that help make explicit the ways effective readers construct meaning from text, encouraged lively discussions and careful consideration of the texts' potential meanings.

This idea of distancing the participants from their comfort zones served also to provide a forum for discussing ways to avoid repeating tired, if essential, old ideas to students who have already heard (and perhaps ignored) those traits that proficient readers regularly employ: having a purpose for reading, creating images while reading, seeing spatial relationships, filling in gaps through inference, recognizing constructions, making personal and intertextual connections, and developing interpretations over time (Pirie 1997, 33-49; Keene and Zimmerman 1997). The strategies we employed for first and subsequent readings helped make these traits visible and tangible. In other words, the strategies helped us all better understand, and be better able to articulate, what we do when we read.

We began with procedures for helping students with cold readings of new texts. The readings from Mike Rose and Jim Gray featured storytelling interspersed with moments of reflection on the significance of the stories being told. We asked participants to mark these pieces with highlighters, using one color to show the places where the writer narrated and another to denote the reflective elements. This strategy accomplishes two ends. First, it gives a person specific purposes for reading something—namely, looking for those elements suggested by the teacher. Second, it provides a visual indication of the structure employed by the writer. In the case of the Rose piece, taken from *Lives on the Boundary*, participants noted that nearly each narrated anecdote was followed by Rose's reflection on the story's significance. While this is unlikely to be any great revelation to a proficient reader, this strategy works by making that structure visible in color. Students who might not otherwise recognize a writer's organizational choices can suddenly see that Rose has taken pains to help his reader understand why his stories are important. Debriefing this activity with participants after its completion elicited the observation that the same strategy could be used any time a reading featured different structural elements. A persuasive essay might be highlighted for assertions and evidence, while a history text could be highlighted for facts and opinions. Whatever the specifics, the highlighting strategy assisted readers in their understanding of the text's content as well as its structure. Additionally, the strategy paid heed to the social aspect of reading; participants' interactions ranged from furtive glances at their neighbors' highlighting to vigorous discussions about what ought to be highlighted. These discussions, too, were fruitful in that they brought to the forefront the decisions made by readers as they construct meaning. The social interactions brought on by the highlighting strategy helped participants talk about their reading processes in concrete terms.

Along with approaches to first readings, we introduced ways to help students revisit texts they had already read once. Teachers know that asking students—especially reluctant readers—to reread a text is unlikely to elicit squeals of delight. One rereading strategy we used in the CPDI asked participants to create a visual interpretation of a text. The reading we selected for this activity was John Dewey's "From Traditional to Progressive Education," a complex essay featuring long, difficult, conceptual sentences with few concrete illustrations. After reading the
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piece through once, we asked participants to "draw" the argument made by Dewey. Drawings and diagrams were completed that depicted what participants felt were the most critical elements of Dewey's essay. Several featured central visual symbols like bridges spanning the gap between traditional and progressive education, although Dewey never suggested such a metaphor specifically; others represented contrasting school environs featuring regimented, lockstep learning juxtaposed with chaotic, unstructured classrooms. One math teacher initially commented that this activity seemed, in his words, "artsy-fartsy" and lacking in rigor. After he represented Dewey's two educational camps as boxers in a ring, he reconsidered, saying that drawing the picture helped him find a way to remember the argument much more clearly than he otherwise would have. Sharing the artwork with the group helped participants see different ways that Dewey's argument could be visualized, while also noting that the most important ideas featured prominently again and again in the drawings. In general terms, the drawing strategy requires readers to revisit a text and its ideas and find a way to express those ideas in a concrete, nonverbal fashion—quite different from the original writer's mode of discourse.

At the same time that these reading strategies were being introduced and evaluated, we tied in methods for helping students find an academic voice in writing. The CPDI readings were thematically linked, all offering professional, informed perspectives on educational issues. We wanted the ideas in the readings to lead the participants toward a position from which they would be able to become authors themselves, writing about the state of public education. Using their own experiences as students and teachers, they found their own voices as they navigated their way through the variety of ideas presented in the CPDI readings.

Our structure for the writing components of the CPDI focused extensively on linking the various reading strategies to prewriting activities. Before we even cracked open a text, we asked participants to create art projects that represented their own contributions to teaching. To facilitate this, we brought in a variety of art supplies—colored paper, clay, glitter glue, chenille sticks, even feathers—that the participants attacked with vigor. The projects they created were not as important as the conversations they facilitated. When presenting their projects to the group, each teacher talked in both concrete and metaphorical terms about what they saw as their contributions to education. This activity gave everyone a starting point against which the ideas about education found in later readings and discussions could be measured.

Furthering this work of preparing participants to write, we asked them to complete informal summaries and double-entry journals as they read. These activities allowed them to recall what they saw as the main ideas for each reading, as well as raise questions they had as they completed the reading. When all of the thematic readings had been completed, we asked participants to work in groups to create synthesizing charts for the readings that listed big ideas, provided key quotations, and articulated connections among the texts. The charts helped participants see the ways each reading treated the same subject, and made visible the range of perspectives a single topic afforded. Additionally, this work allowed us to emphasize not simply the ideas in each reading, but the variety of choices that the authors had to make in constructing their arguments. We kept pushing the participants to think about the readings as "text"—communications put together to convey ideas to particular audiences. Through looking at the work they had created, whether summary, response journal, or chart, we saw that each participant was also creating "text" in the CPDI.

Through combining these reading and prewriting activities, participants eventually were asked to produce drafts of an essay in response to the following prompt:

Bearing in mind all of the ideas in our readings, write about your own take on American education. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the schools you've learned and/or taught in? Are there potentials for education that seem unfulfilled? Are there compromises that you make as a teacher that frustrate you?

Answers to these questions, which are implicitly asked in the essays we read, should help you show your reader where your voice fits into the discussion about education prompted by Gray, Rose, Sizer, Dewey, and White.

The essays produced in response to this were interesting, engaging, and informed. Of course, to reach final form, each paper went through a number of peer-facilitated revisions. During revision, we asked participants to treat their essays as "text." When reading each other's essays, they used the same reading strategies they employed when reading Dewey, Rose, and the other authors. Participants used different-colored highlighters to show
voice, claims, and examples. They drew the arguments presented within their peers' papers. They cut their papers into pieces and rearranged words, sentences, and paragraphs. Writers listened to their papers being read aloud, for the first time, by other participants, who stopped and discussed their developing sense of the paper's argument.

Our revision strategies didn't attempt to tell writers what to do to improve their papers. Instead, they aimed to provide the writer with information about how readers understood what the paper said. By doing this—treating student work not as sacred but simply as text—we wanted to obviate the problem of unproductive writing groups, which all too often feature feedback that simply says, in various ways, "I thought it was a really good paper." We wanted to give writers an understanding of what readers "get" from their essays. The onus of determining what to do to the essay next then lies where it belongs: on the writer's shoulders.

The completion of these essays marked the culmination of our model assignment sequence, which began with reading about education and led to the voicing of multiple interpretations of the state of public education. The success of this sequence sprang from a combination of factors. The topic was one that engaged participants both personally and professionally. The ideas in the CPDI's readings had been wrestled with and discussed thoroughly, individually as well as in small and large groups. The connections among the essays and the participants' experiences had been investigated and charted. The sequence of reading and rereading, coupled with concurrent prewriting, drafting, and revising activities had all prepared the participants for the task. In short, the structure of the assignment—which required reflection on both ideas and on processes—scaffolded participants to a position from which they had something to say and a voice with which to say it.

This sequencing of reading and writing became the next point of engagement for the CPDI's participants. After having experienced for themselves a model reading/writing sequence, the teachers were asked to create, teach, and document an assignment sequence of their own that relied upon the specific literacy practices of their classrooms. A number of teachers were concerned that such sequences would take time away from their classes' core curricula. We encouraged all teachers to see the assignment sequence not as an added burden but as a restructuring tool. We wanted teachers to rethink reading and writing tasks that were already part of the class in order to help students become better able to successfully complete those tasks.

As with the essay on education, most participants embraced this work and produced interesting, informed results. Sequences ranged from small, tentative steps taken over the course of a few class periods to larger, more ambitious assignment sequences that lasted weeks. Participants gave presentations to the CPDI that outlined the key components of their assignments and detailed student work produced from the sequences. This work, along with the essays they had written for the CPDI, was collected and published in a four-inch-thick anthology. Copies were distributed to the participants and their respective administrators and have traveled to local, regional, state, and national meetings of the National Writing Project.

Profiling a mere three of the CPDI participants cannot provide a complete picture of the group but will at least give a sense of the kinds of work participants produced over the course of the four-month institute.

Wendy Drury teaches freshman, sophomore, and senior English courses at Red Bluff Union High School in Red Bluff, California, a city of 13,000 people on the Sacramento River. Writing her essay for the CPDI, Wendy saw a clear connection between the current prominence of standardized testing and Dewey's critique of "traditional" education. While such tests seem to "comfort the masses of parents," they do "not truly prov[e] that students have what they need" to succeed in life, she asserts. The assignment sequence Wendy constructed reflects her essay's concern about student achievement and how it is measured. Focusing on "very low level" ninth-graders and a district-mandated reflective essay, Wendy put together a sequence of readings from Martin Luther King, Jr. and John Howard Griffin to complement To Kill a Mocking-
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birds. Students read, highlighted, and drew aspects of the readings that related to personal values expressed by each text's speaker. This led to writing activities in which they brainstormed, highlighted, and illustrated episodes from their own lives that called into question their personal values. One of those experiences eventually provided the core for each of their reflective essays. While Wendy hoped the assignment sequence would miraculously transform all of her students into proficient readers and writers, such a panacea was not forthcoming. However, "the experiences the students came up with to write about were by far much better" than any she had had before. Wendy's work highlights the ways she helps her students find their way into a text as well as her attempts to articulate her teaching practices.

Science and Spanish are Paula Sanchez's teaching assignments at Yreka High School. Just thirty minutes south of the Oregon border, Yreka is a high-valley community of 7,000 in the shadow of Mount Shasta. Paula's essay on education took its inspiration from Theodore Sizer's Horace's Compromise, a text that denotes the many compromises teachers are forced to make. Paula's work focused on the many constraints "outside influences" place on educators, from ever-changing curricular mandates to ever-increasing standardized tests.

Paula herself has a vision of her work that does not allow for excessive compromise. She refined an assignment in her freshman physical science class to improve students' science literacy. Students had to build and sail a model sailboat of their own design to show their mastery of several principles of physical science. To get students prepared for the task, Paula required that they read, using strategies from the CPDI, a variety of texts: an encyclopedia article on sailing, textbook descriptions of historical ship designs and materials, and a recent Popular Science article on a radical new catamaran design. They also performed experiments on wind dynamics using Bernoulli's principle and documented their work in writing. This led to a quasi-creative writing assignment in which students were to imagine themselves stranded on an island in the Pacific, with ample basic necessities and a large hunk of canvas. Using the texts as resources, and referencing a minimum of six scientific terms and principles, the students wrote out mock diary entries detailing the building of a boat used to return them to civilization.

Paula noted that the use of a variety of texts and text formats "helped [students] get material to use for their projects." The readings gave "depth" to the project, while the reading strategies from the CPDI helped her students to better "understand what they are reading... Evidence of this was shown by [her] lower level students who were able to explain complex material to the rest of the class." Her sequence, in short, allowed her to help her students succeed in learning the science class's curriculum through structured reading and writing.

Pierre Peasha teaches drafting, networking, and metal shop at Central Valley High School in Shasta Lake, a community of 9,000 just minutes north of Redding, California. His choice of target class for his assignment sequence says something about Pierre's values as well. "As a CAD drafting and CISCO internetworking instructor, I get to work with some serious students; however, in the metal shop things can be quite different. This is why I chose this course" to implement the assignment sequence. His "main goal" was to "get students noses into some text. I wanted them to see some value in reading for content as well as reading for pleasure." He used a local community college's "valve-cover car racing" competition as the underlying assignment: students built model cars (whose bodies were made from old engine valve covers) and raced them at the event. But Pierre had students delve far deeper than mere fabrication of the racers. He had them read car magazines like Circle Track and Rod and Custom, and books about stock cars, and watch videos about hot rods and custom cars—all in the quest for an understanding of the discursive styles that characterize writing about such vehicles. After the race event, he asked his students to write, using the styles they had discussed, about the changes they would make to their valve cover racers for next year's race.

Students drafted and revised, and the finished pieces demonstrated an understanding not just of the process of making the racers but also of the reading-writing relationship. Pierre's assignment helped his metal shop students—not widely recognized for their literate practices—understand the style and text features of reading materials that engaged them and employ those same features in their own writing.

Not all experiences with the CPDI were perfect, of course. Two history teachers were, from the outset, uncomfortable with the CPDI's underlying assumption that teaching reading and writing is context specific and needs to happen within each class. These teachers claimed, quite understandably, that they hardly had time to cover their standards-specified content, much less give instruction in reading and writing. Others, including English teachers, had similar feelings about fitting literacy skills into already
crowded curricula; still, when Rochelle and I offered a second-year CPDI for those interested in continuing the work, more than half signed on again.

The CPDI program, for which funding has been cut due to California’s budgetary quagmire, was implemented throughout the state by a number of agencies. From talking to colleagues who also led CPDIs in other parts of the state, I have come to understand that not all of these efforts were as successful as the Northern California Writing Project’s program. I attribute this success to three elements of our institute, only two of which were under our control. First, the content of our CPDI was directly relevant to teachers’ needs, focusing on concrete, research-supported strategies for improving students’ abilities to read and write, not just with competence, but with confidence. Second, the structure of the institute provided intense, focused time that didn’t simply describe the teaching practices and theories, but allowed the participants to experience the effectiveness firsthand. Further, the time between institute meetings—usually no more than two weeks—allowed teachers to try out ideas, assess their viability, and bring back “real-world” results. While these two elements—content and structure—were things that Rochelle and I could manipulate as needed, the third factor—engagement—was due to the professionalism of the CPDI’s participants. While the provision of such inducements as cash stipends and college credit may have accounted for the initial interest in the CPDI, the participants almost uniformly embraced the work. No one “phoned it in,” as the saying goes; instead each took the work seriously, experimented with ideas, and brought a remarkable level of energy to the long weekend sessions. The overall combination resulted in a professional development model that Rochelle and I try emulating, not only in our writing project work but in our classrooms as well.

References

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