Professional Development for Teacher-Writers

Improving writing instruction means encouraging teachers to question assumptions, test strategies, and put learning into practice.

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I took my first course in the teaching of writing in 1979, and a simple idea that I learned there opened up a world of teaching possibilities: Writing can be taught. I had always believed that you were innately either a good or a bad writer and that teachers could only help you become a "correct" writer. I came to the writing instruction course with years of experience in red-penciled essays that noted my incorrect use of who and whom; in comment-free papers handed back with a seemingly random A, B, or C emblazoned across the top; and in yearly instruction in the five-paragraph essay, with its set conclusion, "Certainly, one can see . . . ."

This is not to say that I had bad, lazy, or uninformed teachers. I studied, for the most part, with caring professionals who spent hours reading their students' writing, correcting every error they found. But I experienced something different in that writing instruction class, what Hairston referred to a few years later as "the winds of change" (1982). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a revolution in the community of writing teachers led to a shift in writing instruction. Hairston characterized this shift by distinguishing between a traditional and a new model of writing instruction. The traditional model focused on the composed product, with its adherents believing

that competent writers know what they are going to say before they begin to write; thus their most important task when they are preparing to write is finding a form. . . . to organize their content. They also believe that the composing process is linear, that it proceeds systematically from prewriting to writing to rewriting. Finally, they believe that teaching editing is teaching writing. (p. 78)

In contrast, what I was learning in my graduate class—and what Hairston referred to as the new model—was this: To learn how to write, students actually have to write. Researchers helped us struggling teachers see that when students actually immersed themselves in the business of writing, they learned how to tackle ideas, play with language, and create structures that expressed their thoughts. And as researchers began to study how writers move from idea
to written product, another of the "big ideas" about writing emerged: *Writing is a process*. Most writers, it seems, do some kind of prewriting (in their heads, in conversations with others, or on paper), some kind of drafting, some kind of revising, and some kind of editing—in recursive and often messy ways. Researchers persuaded teachers that simply assigning papers would not teach students to write. Teachers came to understand that they needed to engage students in the processes that writers use and to create instructional strategies that help writers through the various stages. This realization—*teachers need to intervene in students' writing processes*—led to explorations of how to make these interventions count.

Years of research now suggest a plethora of effective strategies and approaches that can help students become thoughtful, critical writers. Yet as I talk to teachers across the United States and observe instruction in schools, I find far too many classrooms in which students are not receiving the kind of instruction that both research and experience recommend. The report from the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges confirms my observations:

> Although many models of effective writing instruction exist . . . both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years. (2003, p. 14)

The report notes that although our knowledge base about writing instruction is strong, several structural issues interfere with teachers' abilities to put this knowledge into practice. Prominent among these issues is comprehensive professional development for teachers.

### Creating a Sound Program

My 20-year vantage point of working with teachers to improve the teaching of writing has convinced me that good professional development is the key to creating changes of heart, mind, and practice. I also know that working with teachers to create sustained classroom change is a tricky undertaking. I've been on both sides of the professional development podium, sometimes sitting in the audience and complaining to those sitting near me about the speaker, the subject, and the time that the session has taken away from my "real" work; sometimes standing in front of an audience of teachers who clearly wish I would just go away so they could go back to teaching. Yet, when done well, professional development has an almost magical power to revitalize and transform teaching and learning. (For principles underlying strong professional development, see the report issued by the Conference on English Education Commission on Inservice Education, 1994.)

Realizing that magical moment is challenging for a number of reasons. First, many writing teachers find writing a bit frightening. Many are uncomfortable as writers, especially if asked to stray beyond a few low-risk genres. Far too many say that they rarely write as adults, and, if they do, it's purely in service of such activities as writing shopping lists and lesson plans or crafting responses to e-mails.

Second, many teachers feel unsure of their knowledge of composition. Although some have taken a writing composition course, many have not—and, as those who have taken such a course soon come to realize, that one class is insufficient to grasp the vast amount of
information that exists about teaching writing. This uncertainty encourages teachers to revert to the kinds of traditional writing instruction that they experienced as students.

A third and increasingly important challenge to teachers is figuring out how to integrate best practices in writing instruction into classroom settings overshadowed by standardized writing tests whose format seems to support the traditional notion of writing instruction. As a result, many schools have returned to the traditional model, in which form takes precedence over ideas and thoughtful revision is considered too time-consuming a task. Several curriculum specialists have pointed out to me that because “the test” requires this kind of writing, teachers feel pressured to teach to the test despite a clear contradiction between this kind of instruction and best practice.

Despite these challenges, I am convinced that sound professional development can lead to sound teaching practices. I offer here the following blueprint for sustained professional development in writing instruction. It is based on my experiences working with teachers as codirector of a National Writing Project site and as content leader for Writing CoLEARN, a program conducted by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to professional development. Rather, any plan must honor teachers and their particular contexts. It must foster their ownership of their learning, encourage collaboration with colleagues, and recognize that change requires sufficient time and support to take root.

**Stage 1: The Self as Writer**

If we want teachers to think carefully about how they teach writing, we must begin with their own experiences as writers. Inviting teachers to respond in writing to a series of questions about their past writing experiences and to share that writing with their colleagues is a powerful way to begin a professional development session.

When teachers explore their histories as writers, they rekindle memories of how they were taught. When they share these memories and backgrounds, they are astonished by the variety of stories they hear. Teachers develop different relationships to writing, and they generally have different approaches. Some love poetry; some hate it. Some do all their revising in their heads; some write several drafts. Some use different processes for different genres; some use similar processes for each genre. Eventually the teachers come to a vital realization: If we all write so differently, what does that mean for our students? How can we honor multiple writing approaches and still work with 35 students in a class? Good questions, to be sure, and the start to some serious thought about how to teach writing.

**Stage 2: The Self as Teacher of Writing**

The second step in the process is to invite teachers to think about themselves as teachers of writing. This step asks teachers to consider their beliefs about language and writing to help them clarify why certain practices are more effective than others. For many teachers, this step involves looking below the surface of their teaching.
When teachers think deeply about their rationales for teaching, they begin to articulate why they use a particular strategy in the classroom and what the implications of using that strategy might be, moving beyond "It's what my teacher did in my 8th grade class," or "I heard a teacher mention it in the lunchroom." Writing privately about these ideas can trigger important—and sometimes uncomfortable—realizations: "Why do I use that particular means of assessment? Could it contradict some of my essential beliefs?" Asking teachers to share their responses can spur an important discussion as they delve into their rationale for certain structures or curriculum requirements in a department, school, or district; as they decide whether those structures reflect their own beliefs, current understandings of writing instruction, or student needs; and, eventually, as they come to believe that other structures might be more appropriate.

Consider this scenario. A teacher articulates her belief that to write well, students must move through multiple drafts, receiving feedback along the way. This belief might lead to the creation of a workshop atmosphere for writing instruction: The teacher begins each class with a targeted craft lesson based on identified student needs and then moves to writing time in which students draft, revise, edit, and consult with teachers and peers along the way.

When it comes to the required final exam, however, the teacher evaluates student progress in writing through a single-draft essay on a department-designed topic. The obvious contradiction between this assessment and the teacher's stated beliefs and practices can, in a powerful professional development moment, lead to discussions on why this kind of final assessment exists, what it purports to assess, and how it fits or doesn't fit into the teaching practices and beliefs of those in the department.

**Stage 3: What Strategies Are Possible?**

These initial reflections about being a writer and a teacher of writing are essential to reach Stage 3, in which teachers consider viable strategies. Too much professional development begins at this point and dictates specific strategies to use. A local school district, for example, may decide it's time for all teachers to learn about vocabulary development, whether or not teachers see it as a pressing need.

I suggest a different approach to professional development: By reflecting deeply on their own backgrounds and belief structures, teachers can more effectively identify valuable strategies that they already use in their teaching as well as strategies that they might implement to satisfy a need or resolve a contradiction in their own practice. At this stage, teachers often determine a specific area or question that they would like to learn more about, such as integrating grammar instruction into writing or creating more authentic experiences for student writers. Responding to questions individually or in groups helps clarify which topic a teacher might wish to tackle. Sometimes the topic or question suggests itself as a result of observation and reflection in the classroom. A teacher observes his or her class for a week, for example, and notices that despite mini-lessons in revision strategies, students still seem frustrated and unfocused during revision time. The teacher might pose and reflect on the following question: What changes can I make in my classroom to help students feel more comfortable with revision?
Thus primed, teachers begin to discuss strategies that pique their curiosity. They might discuss a revision strategy they have always wanted to try; a strategy they have tried but with little success, such as peer conferencing; or a successful strategy they could use even further, such as having students develop a format that suggests revision strategies. If collaboration is strong, the teachers may determine a specific area that they want to reflect on together. For example, I have been working with a group that has spent the past year thinking about issues of assessment—in particular, how such specific assessment strategies as rubrics or comments on student papers can help students become more self-reflective about their writing.

**Stage 4: Students as Writers**

Once teachers have a strategy in mind that they would like to investigate further, it's time for them to turn to their students—and see what happens in the classroom when they put that strategy in place. I am an unabashed believer in practitioner research—in teachers observing their classroom practice, watching how students respond, studying student writing, and reflecting on their observations. As teachers learn to watch their classrooms with new eyes—in this case, through the lens of studying a new practice—they begin to see what works and what doesn't, and they reach some educated conclusions about why learning is or is not happening in the intended ways.

One powerful way to study a practice in action is to focus on a single student. For example, if a teacher were studying how specific mini-lessons could help in the revision process, he or she might observe the particular student during the lesson and as the student begins to write, noticing how the student responds verbally and through body language. The teacher might then focus on the student's writing, studying how the words on the page connect to the lesson taught: Has the student used language differently as a result of the instruction? Has he or she used more metaphors, more descriptive words, or more thoughtful explanations? The teacher might also confer with the student for additional insights.

This approach will help teachers focus on the chosen strategy in a specific way by charting what actually happens in the learning life of someone whom that strategy affects. This offers a different kind of knowledge than more generalized measures, such as an end-of-unit test or a summary of class members' grades, provide. This intense look at one student encourages the kind of detailed knowledge making that is rare for teachers and that can provide so much insight.

**Stage 5: Articulating New Knowledge**

A final step in this blueprint for professional development is for teachers to reflect on what they have learned and to articulate their tentative knowledge—both for themselves and for others in their community of learners. As we tell our students, it's only when we have the occasion to make sense of our learning—to try to write about it—that we find the important connections and make the knowledge part of our daily lives. Busy teachers, of course, rarely have time for the kind of thoughtful reflection that I'm proposing here. Sound professional development
needs to create the time for teachers to take the plunge and immerse themselves in their new learning.

One way in which teachers can successfully articulate this new knowledge is to write a narrative portrait of the student they focused on in Stage 4. Writing such a portrait and sharing it with colleagues who have also written narratives about student writers can lead to an amazing moment of discovery. Reading multiple portraits helps uncover themes, commonalities, and even contradictions.

As an example, consider teachers in a given school who are studying alternative approaches to grammar instruction in an attempt to move from isolated grammar drills to targeted mini-lessons based on student writing. As each teacher creates a written portrait of one student's participation in and response to the lesson, the teacher might explain the specific teaching strategies used and describe how those strategies seemed to affect this particular student, calling on conversations with the student, descriptions of moments in the classroom, and examples from the student's writing. As teachers share their portraits of student responses to the targeted mini-lessons, they may notice that certain approaches are successful across the board—with good writers, average writers, and struggling writers.

The strategy of identifying problem areas in usage in the student's writing and articulating a few main areas for instruction may lead to changes in all students' writing. Teachers may notice, however, that other instructional strategies are not so successful, such as using grammar in context lessons that target the use of dialogue. Further reflection could lead to the realization that students struggling with dialogue might have limited experience reading fiction. Teachers could also consider integrating additional references to grammar in the context of writing.

**Effective Teacher Support**

To create continual improvement in the teaching of writing, professional development must support teachers in their own professional knowledge making. When professional development is designed to provide time and structure for teachers to pursue questions that interest them, and when it honors the knowledge that teachers produce, real change can result. Teachers want to help their students learn. And professional development that recognizes and supports that quest can make a real difference in student success.

**Endnote**

1 The National Writing Project (NWP), a professional development program for teachers, has worked with K–16 teachers for the past 25 years. For more information on NWP, see [www.writingproject.org](http://www.writingproject.org). The National Council of Teachers of English's Writing CoLEARN is a more recent online professional development program designed to help staffs or individual teachers improve their teaching of writing. For more information on CoLEARN, see [www.ncte.org/profdev](http://www.ncte.org/profdev).
References


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