The National Writing Project's distinctive social practices and networks create the learning communities that teachers need.

Ann Lieberman and Diane R. Wood

Compelling descriptions of how teachers learn and studies of the organizational settings that facilitate professional learning have pointed to new ways to improve the professional development of teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1993; Fishman & McCarthy, 2000; Hargreaves, 1994; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). These findings make it more apparent than ever that the old workshop delivery model for teachers must give way to vibrant and ongoing professional learning communities where teachers generate, as well as gain, knowledge.

But how do we build and sustain such communities? Education reform networks are providing answers to this question, demonstrating ways in which teachers can become involved in learning communities—where their knowledge of teaching is valued and shared with other teachers (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996).

The National Writing Project, arguably the most successful teacher network in the United States, offers a model of how to foster learning communities of teachers. Begun in 1974 at the University of California at Berkeley and funded primarily by federal grants, the National Writing Project has spawned regional learning communities and more than 165 local sites that help teachers improve how they teach writing and foster student learning. Each site grows out of a school-university partnership. Teachers' participation in the National Writing Project begins on a college campus at a five-week invitational institute that is staffed by university and school-based personnel. Core activities during the summer institutes include sharing best lessons or strategies, participating in small writing groups, and receiving peer feedback. These opportunities to write and reflect with other teachers help create an ongoing social network of teachers that develops throughout the year.

From 1997 to 1999, we studied two sites of the National Writing Project, the University of California-Los Angeles and Oklahoma State University. We found two key features that underlie the National Writing Project’s successful approach to teacher development: a distinctive set of social practices that motivate teachers, make learning accessible, and build an ongoing professional community; and networks that organize and sustain relationships among these communities and produce new and revitalizing forms of support, commitment, and leadership.
Social Practices of the Writing Project

The distinctive social practices of the National Writing Project evolve from the premise that teachers build valuable expertise from what they do in their classrooms, so their professional development must begin with what they already know, and from the belief that students benefit when teachers share and critique their best ideas and strategies with one another.

All sites have in common a set of distinctive social practices that identify them as part of the National Writing Project, yet each local site establishes its own way of responding to local needs. These highly interactive and flexible social practices create a culture that supports and sustains continual professional development, builds professional knowledge, and imbues participants with a sense of belonging. What are these distinctive social practices?

*Treat every colleague as a potentially valuable contributor.* Although many organizations invite full participation in theory, few achieve it in practice. The National Writing Project, however, starting with the initiation of new members during summer institutes and follow-up activities, builds its agenda around the contributions of every participant. What each teacher thinks, wonders, reads, learns, and questions becomes the content for professional development. One teacher told us,

I came to the summer institute scared to death to write or to share my writing, but everyone expected me to write and to have something to say, so I wrote, and I discovered that I did have something to say.

*Teach other teachers.* The National Writing Project encourages a dual commitment from teachers: to share what they know and to learn from what colleagues know. Most project teachers experience greater confidence in themselves as learners because they know that they have capable peers on whom they can depend for advice and guidance.

*Share, discuss, and critique in public forums.* Key to breaking through teacher isolation and silence are the public forums that the Writing Project creates for teachers to share their work and then critique and discuss it. Teachers create multiple forums to take their work public, such as presentations for parents and professional conferences, demonstrations for and critical conversations with colleagues, articles for professional journals, professional discussions via electronic conferencing, and contributions to local newsletters and newspapers. Teachers develop a common investment in the quality of their contributions and a healthy respect for critique.

*Turn ownership of learning over to the learners.* The Writing Project insists on professional development built around the problems and concerns that teachers raise. Such a practice turns the current notion of teacher accountability on its head because those responsible for assessing classroom practices are the community’s teachers—not outsiders using standardized test results. The teachers, then, are responsible for creating and implementing a professional development agenda that will make teachers more responsive to students’ learning needs.

Teachers go to a summer invitational institute expecting professional development, and what they discover is engaging involvement in a professional community. On the first day of a typical
invitational institute, for example, the director may read an unfinished piece of his or her writing or teach a writing lesson and ask for critical feedback from the teachers. By the second day, the teachers have taken over the process of giving and receiving feedback, reading from their own written work or teaching a writing lesson and getting feedback from their peers. What grows from this ongoing process is a community of learners who are deeply involved in looking closely at their practice of teaching and writing. Then, when teachers return to their classrooms, they can use this process of turning learning over to the learners to develop communities of engaged student writers.

_Situate learning in practice and relationships._ Learning in the National Writing Project is active and relational. Teachers engage in writing projects, demonstrate approaches to their work, and actively participate as critical audiences for one another. This kind of learning requires a community that encourages and supports those who take risks, that tolerates mistakes and learns from them, and that values constructive critique.

_Produce multiple entry points into learning communities._ Teachers come to the National Writing Project with a variety of passions and concerns and from different stages of their careers. Inexperienced teachers want to learn basic strategies for teaching writing, such as how to brainstorm writing ideas individually and in groups or how to coach students through revisions. Those with some experience may be in search of new strategies and resources, such as how to help students vary sentence structure or encourage a class of diverse learners to do effective peer reviews. Veteran teachers find that they learn a great deal about their own teaching by sharing what they have honed from years of practice. The project provides multiple entry points for engagement to meet these different needs and offers teachers opportunities to come together to identify and investigate individual challenges.

_Reflect on teaching by reflecting on learning._ Because Project teachers engage directly in the learning process, they pay attention to the frustrations, fears, joys, and triumphs of being a learner. Reflecting on their own learning, they then apply these insights to their teaching practices.

_Share leadership._ The summer institutes that initiate new teachers into the project encourage and promote leadership. From the beginning, teachers lead discussions, give teaching demonstrations, and prepare for taking their best work public. Once having recognized their potential for leadership, many teachers continue to practice it. Some become leaders in their own buildings. Some contribute to the professional development of colleagues in their schools and beyond. Finally, some engage in political efforts to create policy contexts friendly to the work of the National Writing Project.

_Adopt a stance of inquiry._ The idea that inquiry and research are fundamental to good teaching permeates the culture. This propensity, rooted in a strong sense of responsibility to students, demonstrates the belief that, together, teachers can find better ways to answer the learning needs of students.

_Rethink professional identity and link it to the professional community._ To be a National Writing Project teacher is to be a colleague. Quality teaching becomes for teachers not just an individual but a group responsibility. These social practices center on learning what it means to
be a learner and understanding what it means to help others learn.

In *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Wenger (1998) describes "learning as social participation" (p. 4). He suggests that participation in communities of practitioners "shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" (p. 4) and that such communities become arenas for professional learning because the people in them imbue activities with shared meanings, develop a sense of belonging, and create common identities. In keeping with Wenger's social theory of learning, the social practices of the Writing Project convey professional norms and purposes, create a sense of belonging, and shape professional identities.

**Developing Local Networks**

Once teachers leave the five-week invitational institute, their professional development experience continues to grow through the network sites. These networks not only offer the follow-up that is missing in many professional development programs, but they also provide a variety of ways for teachers to participate in this supportive community.

Networks differ from formal organizations in that they organize the activities first and then develop the structures needed to support the activities. The form, length, and duration of activities in each Writing Project network site relate directly to their continued importance to local participants. Study groups, summer offerings, and online book groups are examples of activities that network sites may organize and offer once or for an extended time. This loose and flexible organization structure helps keep the networks responsive to the immediate and long-term needs of the teachers.

In the two sites that we studied, for example, the local networks offered teachers a variety of ways to stay connected, deepen their work, get support, and take leadership as teacher consultants. The formats of the networks reflected the local needs of the teachers. At the University of California-Los Angeles, for example, the network site created a weeklong summer institute focused on teaching English to beginning English language learners, and at Oklahoma State University, Project teachers held special language arts institutes in two rural areas. The offerings at both sites were open to any teacher.

These education networks give teachers numerous opportunities to share what they know. Not only does the exchange of ideas provide them with useful, practical knowledge for their own work, but it also helps create communities of professionals in pursuit of constant improvement of their practice. Some teachers become teacher consultants, organizing professional development opportunities in schools or districts. These consultants extend the social practices of the Writing Project, offering other teachers opportunities to participate actively in sharing and improving their teaching practices.

The local networks of Writing Project sites encourage posing problems and asking questions rather than providing prescriptive or prepackaged answers, offering teachers opportunities to respond to the particular needs of their urban, rural, or suburban contexts. Involved in creating and implementing these activities, teachers develop an appreciation of the continual challenges of teaching and a sophisticated notion of what it means to be a professional teacher capable of
responding to the needs of diverse students in a changing world.

**Networks and Social Practices**

Networks enrich the Writing Project's social practices by responding to the local needs of teachers and challenging teachers to connect to an ever-widening vision of their professional responsibilities. Despite local differences in context and character, the networks stay anchored in the Writing Project's social practices, creating rich opportunities for teachers to develop learning communities that meet the needs of the new century.

**References**


---

**Ann Lieberman** is a senior scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and codirector of the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) for K–12, 995 Wing Pl., Stanford, CA 94305; [annl1@stanford.edu](mailto:annl1@stanford.edu). **Diane R. Wood** is an assistant professor in the Educational Leadership Program, College of Education and Human Development, University of Southern Maine, Bailey Hall 222A, Gorham, ME 04038; [drwood@maine.edu](mailto:drwood@maine.edu).

Copyright © 2002 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development