

Chapter 75

Adding the “Digital Layer”: Examining One Teacher’s Growth as a Digital Writer Through an NWP Summer Institute and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

Opportunities for teachers to engage in professional development that leads to substantive change in their instructional practice are few, yet the National Writing Project (NWP) provides one such “transformational” experience through their summer institutes (Whitney, 2008). Also, despite recent moves in the field of English education to integrate digital writing into teacher education and K-12 schools (NWP, et al., 2010), professional development models that support teachers’ “technological pedagogical content knowledge” (Mishra & Koehler, 2008) related to teaching digital writing are few. This case study documents the experience of one teacher who participated in an NWP summer institute with the author, himself a teacher educator and site director interested in technology and writing. Relying on evidence from her 2010 summer experience, subsequent work with the writing project, and an interview from the winter of 2013, the author argues that an integrative, immersive model of teaching and learning digital writing in the summer institute led to substantive changes in her classroom practice and work as a teacher leader. Implications for teacher educators, researchers, and educational policy are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In order to create substantive change in a teacher’s practice, professional development must be inquiry-driven, responsive, and ask teachers to take risks with their own learning (e.g. Cochran-

Smith & Lytle, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Goswami, Lewis, Rutherford, & Waff, 2009; Lieberman & Wood, 2003). This is especially true when the risk involved requires teachers to use technology in some substantive manner, often in a way that pushes back against their own comfort level or existing skills (e.g. Collins & Halverson, 2009; Cuban, 2001; Zhao & Frank, 2003). Invit-

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ing teachers to become more proficient at using technology to teach writing, then, involves at least two factors: first, changing their perspective on what it means to *teach writing*, and then changing their perspective on what it means to *teach writing with technology*.

One model of such transformational change for teaching writing involves the invitational summer institutes of the National Writing Project (NWP). As an occasion for teachers to bring their own knowledge, experience, and questions into conversation with a wide variety of colleagues, the Summer Institute (SI) acts as a space for what many call “transformational” change as teachers are able to overcome anxiety about writing, share personal writing, offer feedback in writing groups, and simply give one’s self the permission to write (Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Whitney, 2008). Year after year, over 90% of teachers “rate the overall quality and value of NWP institutes highly” (Stokes, 2011, p. ii).

Still, while Whitney (2008) claims that the teachers from the SI “presumably set out to live their lives in new ways” based on their experience, she also cautions that:

[T]he changes these teachers made are more about ways of knowing and seeing than about enacting new courses of action—surely it is possible that one could drastically change actions without changing meaning perspectives at all, and conversely, a titanic shift in perspective may not translate into many visible changes at all... (p. 175)

Discovering what changes have occurred in a teacher’s practice is not a one-time event, taken by a survey at the end, even if that event is as transformational as a writing project SI. Instead, in order to understand how a teacher has changed, it requires that we build sustained relationships over time. Thus, my research with teachers aims to solve the riddle of whether or not transformations in the SI are sustained, addressing the first factor above.

And, while instructional technology has not always been at the core of the writing project SI experience, the NWP has, over the past decade especially, made a strong case for the importance of teaching digital writing—writing that is composed with a computer, tablet, smart phone, or similar device and designed for reading, listening, viewing, and/or interacting through such a device. This line of work around digital writing addresses the second factor noted above and has emerged from intersections in the fields of composition and rhetoric, new literacies, and technology-rich professional development. Through a variety of initiatives, some of which I have been directly involved, I have seen first-hand how the NWP has taken seriously the many calls over the first decade of the twenty-first century to teach digital writing. For instance, the book *Teaching the New Writing* has extended the work of many existing NWP teachers to think explicitly about how to teach writing with technology (Herrington, Hodgson, & Moran, 2009). *Because Digital Writing Matters* asks and sets out to answer questions such as

1. What does it mean to write digitally,
2. To create spaces for digital writing in our schools, and
3. To extend assessment practices that account for the complexities of writing in a digital world (National Writing, DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, & Hicks, 2010)?

More recently, NWP has garnered support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, to create the “Digital Is...” Website which “gathers resources, collections, reflections, and stories about what it means to teach writing in our digital, interconnected world” (National Writing Project, n.d.-a).

Still, teaching digital writing creates a strong tension that many educators feel in relation to covering a set amount of curriculum in preparing their students for high-stakes tests, coupled with a lack of access to technology (Turner & Hicks,

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