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Transforming Writing Teachers: Two Professional Development Possibilities

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Cover Page Footnote

This article is in MLA format.

INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that teaching is a demanding profession. On any given school day, teachers must plan activities and lessons that are both engaging to students and meet a number of different state and local standards for the students' learning outcomes. If teaching in general is difficult, however, teaching writing is even more demanding. Writing teachers must prepare students for the myriad of writing tasks that students will encounter in their lives, regardless of the students' chosen careers or life paths. Writing teachers have to constantly make visible the largely invisible process of composing and revising a piece of writing from its first inkling of an idea to its final publication. Combined with the ongoing paper load that writing teachers tackle on a daily basis, it is also no secret that writing teachers have a difficult job that requires dedication and careful thinking.

Given these demands, many writing teachers look to professional development to provide fresh teaching ideas, connections with other professionals, and new ways to manage the stress that too often comes with the territory. Although professional development opportunities vary widely depending on the teaching context, school resources, and teacher preferences, they often provide an important way for teachers to connect with other teaching professionals and develop their own practice. At its core, the purpose of professional development is to enhance and facilitate student learning in the most productive ways possible. Yet, with the focus on student outcomes, professional development can seem like a bunch of discrete strategies to squeeze onto an already overflowing plate of tasks. Too few professional development activities focus on the teacher as more than just a purveyor of knowledge to students. Those that do, however, offer teachers some very powerful and transformative experiences that change not only the teacher's day-to-day practice, but also change the teacher's perception of herself and her role in the classroom.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: CURRENT TRENDS

The literature on teachers' professional development has shifted considerably in recent years away from a focus on the traditional professional development workshops toward a more organic approach to teacher learning. Whereas older literature examined professional development as one-time programs or experiences provided by a facilitator from outside the district with a purpose of changing teachers, more recent literature frames teachers as active learners and participants in professional development programs or experiences that arise from within the district, school, or individual classroom (Borko; Clarke & Hollingsworth; Cochran-

Smith & Lytle; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet). This change is a significant one because it denotes a shift from seeing professional development as the prerogative of knowledgeable outsiders toward a view of teachers as professionals in charge of their own development and learning. Clarke & Hollingsworth note, “The key shift is one of agency: from programs that change teachers to teachers as active learners shaping their professional growth through reflective participation in professional development programs and in practice” (948). This view of professional development is now widely accepted and acknowledged as the way that teachers learn in their profession.

Although the research on teacher professional development has evolved to focus on teachers as catalysts for the most valuable professional learning, this shift in thinking is not always reflected in schools. In fact, with the increased adoption of nationwide education policies such as Response to Intervention and the Common Core State Standards, school districts, administrators, and even teachers themselves feel compelled to seek professional development that is quick and targeted to these specific initiatives. And, while school districts willingly support teachers to attend trainings and professional development opportunities that advance these initiatives within the schools, districts are often not as willing to support professional development opportunities that reflect other interests. This ongoing tension between professional development that schools deem necessary for teachers’ day-to-day work and professional development that is driven by teachers’ unique interests points to a deeper debate about what kinds of knowledge teachers and schools deem valuable and important.

A further tension about what is valued in teacher professional development arises when we consider how to define professional development as “effective.” There are a number of educational researchers that contend that the literature shows a common understanding of what effective professional development entails (Cochran-Smith and Lytle; Desimone; Garet et al.; Little; Putnam and Borko; Wayne et al.; Wilson and Berne). In their review of teacher professional development literature, Wilson and Berne synthesize the common themes and contend that effective professional development consists of a community of teacher learners, active learning on the part of the participants, ample time for teacher interaction, an acknowledgement that teacher learning is fluid and constantly changing as a result of the professional development, and teacher learning must be linked to student achievement (194-196). These structures and elements portray teacher professional development as teacher-focused and teacher-driven, as well as deeply entwined with teachers’ day-to-day practice.

Perhaps one of the most influential theories of teacher learning in general has been Lave and Wenger's theories of communities of practice. By examining how people engage in "legitimate peripheral participation" to increase their knowledge of new practices, Lave and Wenger provide examples from a variety of learning situations to illustrate that learning is indeed situated in practice. However, in communities of practice, it is not only learners who change, and learning is not an individual act or process. As participants learn, the context is undeniably changed, which further changes the learning shared by the participants. Learning and the learner are constantly evolving in the shared experience.

This view of learning as situated within mutually beneficial systems of participants and experiences has influenced much of the literature on teacher professional development. With clear connections to Lave and Wenger's theories, researchers contend that the physical and social contexts are integral parts of the learning activity for teachers. Thus, learning occurs everywhere in a teacher's profession (Borko 4), and to understand the nature of teacher learning about their practice, it is necessary to seek out a deeper understanding of the relationship "between the knower and the known" (Putnam and Borko 12). With these perspectives of teacher learning as situative and complex, Opfer & Pedder and Pella call for conceptualizations of teacher professional development to be equally complex and situated in particular learning contexts. Unlike Wilson & Berne and Desimone who argue for a defined teacher knowledge base with which to assess the outcomes of teacher professional development, Opfer & Pedder and Pella argue that professional development research will be necessarily complex and situative too. Thus, teacher professional development must be uniquely tailored to each teacher's unique teaching situation and needs in order to be optimally valuable for the teacher's learning.

With this view of professional development as carefully situated in teacher experience and complex enough to reflect the demands of the profession, it becomes clear that traditional professional development that focuses only on the acquisition of new teaching strategies is not sufficient. Instead, professional development opportunities that are built upon and reflect teachers' unique teaching contexts and needs will provide deeper and more valuable experiences to inform teachers' practice. While there remain tensions between what constitutes valuable professional development for the various school stakeholders, teachers will continue to seek out opportunities that allow them not only to improve their professional practice, but also to improve the quality of their professional lives. As the pressure increases for schools and teachers to do more with fewer resources,

so too does the need to alleviate those pressures through engaging in professional development that provides learning beyond traditional “sit and get” workshops. Two such opportunities for meaningful, situated, and complex professional development are the National Writing Project (NWP) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT

The mission of the National Writing Project is to “focus the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of our nation’s educators on sustained efforts to improve writing and learning for all learners” (*National Writing Project*). Using a model of “teachers teaching teachers” in sustained summer institutes, the National Writing Project cultivates a community of teachers as writers and teachers who share professional knowledge to improve individual and group teaching practice. Teacher consultants, those who have completed a summer institute at one of the 197 local sites affiliated with the National Writing Project, share their knowledge of and questions about teaching writing with other teachers as a way of continuing the learning well beyond the summer institute. An emphasis on reflective practice undergirds every aspect of the National Writing Project. Rather than only increasing teacher participants’ knowledge base of teaching practices, “creating and sustaining well-informed, effective, and committed teachers in the practice of teaching writing is the driving force behind the creation and promulgation of the NWP and the sole reason for its continued educational research, development, and implementation” (Kaplan 339).

The National Writing Project, seen through the lens of professional development, is uniquely situated and complex enough to account for teachers’ needs. The content of each day’s work comes from teachers’ experiences as writers and writing teachers; thus, unlike many other more traditional forms of professional development, teachers have fewer occasions when they feel as though their learning about teaching methods is divorced from their actual experience and understandings of what it means to be a writer and teacher. The result is an extremely compelling and influential form of teacher learning that allows individual teachers to transform their practice based on independent and collaborative inquiry. One conversation with past Writing Project participants reveals the influential nature of the summer institutes. It is not uncommon for participants to describe the Writing Project as transformative, magical, or life-changing (Whitney).

MINDFULNESS-BASED STRESS REDUCTION

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), though not specifically designed for writing teachers, offers a powerful professional development opportunity for writing teachers to manage the stress of a demanding career. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction uses secular meditation techniques to raise a person's awareness and to reduce his or her level of distraction. At its core, mindfulness is "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally" (Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go*). MBSR programs often consist of 2-3 hour weekly group sessions that last for 8-10 weeks, which include individual practice at home. During the sessions, participants are encouraged to focus their attention on the moment through body scans ("sequentially attending to each part of one's body, starting with the tip of one's toes to the top of one's head") and breath awareness activities ("noticing the sensations in one's nose, throat, and chest as one breathes") (Zelazo and Lyons 3; Kabat-Zinn, "An Outpatient Program"). Participants are told that while directing attention toward their breath, if their mind wanders, they should simply bring their attention back to their breath again, without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go*). Activities such as this are intended to help participants go beyond immediately reacting to stressful situations. With practice, participants can learn to improve their self-regulation, avoiding an immediate emotional reaction in favor of returning their attention to the current moment (Zelazo and Lyons).

Although a goal of MBSR is to "regulate emotions and stress" (Roeser et al. 3), participants note that meditation does not change the circumstances and events of one's life—it changes the way one reacts to those circumstances and events. Teachers who have taken MBSR courses explain that mindfulness has also helped them to truly listen to student comments and inquiries to be more aware of where a statement or question might be coming from; for instance, when a student asks, "Why do we have to do this writing activity?" that question may be a result of the fact that the student didn't sleep much the night before or is struggling with understanding the content. A mindful teacher would respond in such a way that took those factors into account. Part of mindfulness training is understanding, without judgment, where the student is coming from. Another benefit of MBSR is that participants express having increased compassion that comes from a heightened state of awareness. For example, teachers who have been through MBSR courses describe reacting differently to students who are being disruptive in school by being more compassionate in the way that they handle the situation.

MBSR helps to cultivate teachers' habits of mind, such as "tolerance for uncertainty, attentional focus, cognitive flexibility, and emotion regulation" (Roeser et al. 4). Promoting these habits improves teachers' occupational health and well-being and should help teachers form supportive relationships with students and develop a positive classroom environment (Roeser et al.). Some schools are starting to teach MBSR to students directly, but even if solely teachers are trained in mindfulness, students can benefit from the improved relationships and classroom environment.

Using mindfulness training in education is increasing in popularity. Around the United States alone, schools and mindfulness programs are forming partnerships, such as the partnership between the Waisman Center Early Childhood Education Program and the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds in Madison, WI. This partnership provides mindfulness training to the early childhood teachers and investigates "the extent to which MBSR can be used as a program to improve the mental and physical health of teachers" (*Center for Investigating*). Other schools in the Madison area have started to offer the mindfulness training as a professional development option for high school educators and staff. The MBSR trainers that lead the courses have tailored the training for educators specifically. Many participants have described MBSR being "life altering" and "lasting" (*Integrative Medicine*). One participant commented, "I feel like a different person, and it's wonderful" (*Integrative Medicine*).

POSSIBILITIES AND NEW DIRECTIONS

In November 2006, the National Council of Teachers of English released a position statement detailing seven principles guiding English teachers' professional development. In addition to providing strong support for professional development as essential to teachers' work and professionalism, NCTE described the kind of professional development that is most effective and valuable for English teachers: "The best models of professional development—best in the sense of enhancing first, teacher practice leading to second, student learning—are characterized by sustained activities, by engagement with administrators, and by community-based learning" (*Principles of Professional*). This statement values an emphasis on professional development as a way for teachers to learn about their own pedagogy and practice, not simply to learn new teaching techniques to use in their classrooms. This is a subtle but important rhetorical shift for teachers' professional learning. The teacher is not simply a vessel through which effective practices are filtered; rather, professional development that focuses on teachers' learning and values the processes that teachers use to

incorporate new understandings about their practice is a worthwhile endeavor as well. Rather than thinking of teacher learning as being only in service of student outcomes, this position emphasizes the importance of teacher learning for teachers themselves. An apt analogy for this shift in thinking about professional development is to think of student learning in an era of standardized testing. Students are assessed on a certain set of discrete skills, but teachers teach their students to be able to do more than just memorize that set of discrete skills. Teachers want their students to develop as learners, as thinkers, as citizens, and as active participants in local and global communities. Professional development, as it is has often been conceived in the past, values a set of discrete skills that teachers can use with students in order for the students to show improvement in various measures of student achievement. However, the recent shift in thinking about professional development asks school professionals to think of the teachers as learners and to value teachers' growth because teacher growth and learning will impact student growth and learning too.

The power of the National Writing Project and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction lies in each program's ability to focus on the teacher's individual growth and learning. Unlike more traditional forms of professional development, these programs work toward personal outcomes. In the National Writing Project, this means that the teacher participants see themselves as writers in order to understand what writers need and do. In Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, participants see themselves as mindful people who can manage the daily stressors that arise in their lives. Both of these programs focus on the individual participants' growth, but both programs also acknowledge that changes in the participant will affect that participant's interactions with others as well.

NWP and MBSR, as programs for professional development, share other similarities as well. Both are voluntary and overarching in their purposes. Both are explicitly tied to participants' own experiences and needs, making them very situated in practice, and both are complex enough to reflect the complexity of teachers' experiences. There is no "sit and get" in either of these programs. Instead, these experiences are focused on understanding the complexity of teachers' lives both in and outside of the classroom.

This model is a vast departure from much professional development for teachers that is mandated by a district or administrator. Often topics for such professional development are pre-determined (though this has been slowly changing with the surge in popularity of professional learning communities). Diaz-Maggioli calls for professional development to be

delivered in a variety of modes and for educators to have more ownership in their professional development. Mindfulness training and the National Writing Project are two examples of professional development that are empowering for teachers because teachers have more agency in their participation. Part of their power comes from the fact that, rather than being required training workshops, these two opportunities are voluntary, which may serve to make teachers who participate in them feel more invested. Often participation in these opportunities comes about when teachers hear about the experiences of other teachers who have participated. So, rather than being a school-wide or district-wide initiative, teachers become interested based on the recommendations of past participants. Not only does this increase the credibility of these two programs as ones that are worthwhile, teachers who do participate feel as though they are entering an established and growing community of teachers and professionals.

In addition to their value as voluntary and community-oriented programs, both mindfulness training and the National Writing Project are overarching in their purpose. They transcend traditional professional development in that both opportunities consider the teacher as a whole person who has valuable insight about herself and her practice. In the National Writing Project, teachers think, collaborate, and work to develop themselves as writers. As the teacher participants develop their own practice as writers, they also think in new ways regarding their practice of teaching writing. Similarly, MBSR participants develop their own abilities to manage stress and become mindful of their emotional and psychological well-being in order to help students develop mindful practices. Rather than being about strategies for teaching, these two professional development opportunities focus first on the teachers as a way of helping them understand themselves and new ways of teaching. Furthermore, the learning that teachers gain in these programs has implications for teachers that go beyond the classroom. Teacher participants develop habits and behaviors that affect their everyday lives too. It is the hope of these programs that the participants will practice mindfulness or they will practice writing in their personal lives as well as their professional lives.

While very powerful on their own, these two programs could complement each other, as one focuses on practice and the other focuses on stress-management. These two professional development programs allow time and space for participants to think carefully about their teaching practice. This time and space makes the job more manageable and connects teachers to a supportive community. Moreover, mindfulness practice extends far beyond stress management to encourage thoughtful, conscious decision-

making, and the Writing Project encourages a similar level of consciousness about purposefully teaching writing. Both programs help teachers think more deeply about what students need in terms of their lives in the classroom community. These programs do not simply advocate for an individual method or strategy; rather, they change the way teachers see themselves and their students. Teachers who have participated in NWP and MBSR transform the entire feel and environment of their classrooms. Together, these programs allow teachers to be more engaged in their classroom practice.

CHALLENGES TO PARTICIPATION

Despite the vast amount of positive feedback about these two programs from past participants and despite the immense potential of these two programs to provide valuable professional development, teachers face a number of challenges in getting access to these opportunities. First, both programs are available in a limited number of cities. The National Writing Project sites are connected to colleges and universities. While there are frequent NWP initiatives to reach teachers who live and work beyond the geographical reach of colleges and universities, there are still large areas of the country untouched by a NWP site. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction courses pose a similar challenge because they are not available everywhere and are often found in larger cities. Because there are many different ways of understanding mindfulness practice, not all mindfulness courses follow the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course curriculum.

Recently the National Writing Project lost its federal funding, so every site is self-sustaining in some way. This has caused some sites to shut down, and other to shrink the scope and size of their programs. Each site individually determines how much support it provides for teachers in terms of funding the graduate credits and books. While the National Writing Project often provides some funding to teachers to enable them to participate and to offset the cost to individual districts, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction courses often must be funded by the individual. MBSR courses vary in cost to the participant, but many are in the \$300-600 dollar range for an eight week course. Some schools are providing this funding for teachers by seeking out grants.

Even in places where these courses and funding are available, not all school districts are willing to support teachers to participate in these initiatives. With the ever-increasing pressures for teachers to understand and implement new state and national educational initiatives, many school districts are designating most or all of teachers' professional development

funding and time go toward the advancement of teacher knowledge about these initiatives. Because of this, getting administrators to “buy in” to the idea of funding teachers’ professional development that falls outside of mandated initiatives is more difficult. Whereas the National Writing Project focuses explicitly on teachers’ practices in the teaching of writing (and thus provides an easier argument for districts to fund this program), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction truly focuses on individual participants’ development as individuals. This creates a more difficult argument for district administrators, as some may see this program as a teacher’s personal prerogative rather than a program that develops teachers’ practice.

Although the issue of access is a challenge that is difficult to mitigate at this point, funding and buy-in are two challenges that require districts to think more broadly about what constitutes high quality teacher professional development. NWP and MBSR offer two very unique opportunities for teachers to develop their practice through personal reflection and collaboration with others. These two programs, while not directly related to state and national educational initiatives, will have an impact on teachers’ practice and will, thus, affect teachers’ ability to meet larger educational goals. We hope that as more districts become familiar with recent literature about professional development, teachers will have more opportunities to participate in programs such as the National Writing Project and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.

In the absence of access to NWP and MBSR, we encourage teachers to advocate for more control over the types of professional development activities they participate in with their colleagues. One of the most valuable outcomes participants in these two programs experience is a sense of agency and empowerment regarding their teaching practices. The explosion in popularity of professional learning communities is moving the field closer to teacher-initiated models such as NWP or MBSR. Professional development will be more effective if teachers are able to design their own professional development experiences, including conducting classroom research, participating in shared book study, and collaborating across departments or disciplines. The more control teachers have over their professional development activities and the more those activities allow teachers to value their own professional knowledge, the more powerful the professional development experiences will be.

CONCLUSION

The National Writing Project has been well-studied as a vastly different kind of professional development for teachers of writing. In contrast to NWP,

which is fairly well-established, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction is an up-and-coming opportunity for professional development, but the structures and purposes of MBSR mirror the structures and purposes of NWP. Both programs, as professional development opportunities, are touted by participants as transformative for their practice as teachers and people. With such glowing praise of these programs, it is surprising that there are so few opportunities like these. As writing teachers, we are particularly hard hit by demanding workloads and stressful teaching environments. We need programs like these. We need more opportunities to connect with other writing teachers, both to develop our practice and to manage the demands of the profession. It is time for universities, professional developers, and schools to invest in high quality professional development programs like NWP and MBSR. Professional development needs to be more complex, more situated in teachers' practice, more agentic, and more focused on the teacher as a whole person. Writing teachers do more in their classrooms than teach just writing, so professional development needs to do more than just teach strategies for teaching writing.

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