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## Structure Speaks: User-Centered Design and Professional Development

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## Structure Speaks: User-Centered Design and Professional Development

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Likely, all of us have had the experience of trying to work within a system that just didn't seem like the right fit for the job. In our professional lives, maybe that has been a learning management system with the most important tools in the wrong places, accounting software that was difficult to navigate, or a website that was tricky to update or difficult to manage. Scholars in the field of technical communication have spent a lot of time thinking about how to deal with these kinds of issues, and their efforts to create more compatible spaces for users can help to relieve many of the tensions we encounter as educators when designing and providing professional development programs for our teachers (Spinuzzi, 2005). In this essay, we argue that creating professional development based on the characteristics of participatory design from the field of technical communication has the potential to redistribute power relations among PD providers and participants in ways that foster active participation and support teachers' positioning as powerful, inquiring professionals.

Participatory design is a design method representing a shift in perspective from designing *for* users to designing *with* users. Although clearly existing in different worlds, technology and education are in close conversation with one another. When a user struggles with a product's design, that user can feel frustrated, like the design is counterintuitive to how a site or program is supposed to interface with users. Unfortunately, educators often experience similar feelings of frustration when they attend or participate in professional development that, for one of countless reasons, isn't a good fit: the topic comes at the wrong time; the ideas presented are not central to teachers' concerns; or teachers are not provided with the support they would need to implement new practices. When users aren't consulted, designers can become out of sync with users' needs and expectations. However, when programs are co-designed *with* users, this disconnect becomes much less likely.

In "Elaborating a Model of Teacher Professional Growth," Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) provide a history of the enterprise of professional development and posit that the most significant shift in contemporary PD has been in the understanding of how change happens. Allegedly, professional development providers are moving away from one-shot programs that attempt to

do something to address perceived deficits and towards structures that empower teachers as active learners reflecting on their own practice (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). This best-case scenario is not the present reality for all, and even in the professional development that we are collaborating to provide, we fear the power structure remains skewed towards the providers. After all, PD presenters typically decide what, how, and when information is presented, and if one would record one of our sessions and analyze it for turn taking, unsurprisingly one would find presenters dominating the space.

In late 2012, the National Writing Project (NWP) received a Race to the Top Investing in Innovation grant from the United States Department of Education to fund its' proposed College-Ready Writers Program (CRWP). The goal of the CRWP is to work with 7<sup>th</sup> through 10<sup>th</sup> grade English language arts teachers in order to help improve student performance in argument writing. This national study relies on individual writing project sites to co-design and carry out the professional development with selected rural school districts over a three-year period, ultimately setting up a comparison of the argumentative writing abilities between treatment and control students. At the core of the NWP model is the belief that effective PD provides teachers with opportunities to write and to examine research and practice for themselves. Because of this orientation, the NWP model inherently privileges participants. It is the responsibility of local sites to assure that this stance is enacted.

As recipients of the grant, we—Nikki and Chris—began working through our local site of the NWP to design and implement a two-year professional development experience for a local, rural district that had been chosen as the treatment district for the CRWP grant. We agreed early on that we needed to design a program with a keen eye towards the power structure we would be establishing. An experience providing professional development to a rural school through a different grant program had recently heightened our awareness of what can go awry in these programs. We did not want to repeat our past mistake of creating a situation that looked like university faculty coming out to tell in-service teachers how to do their jobs, and we did not want to operate from a deficit model in our thinking about the teachers. Instead, our hope was to design a collaborative environment where teachers would feel empowered and excited to work together to contribute to and benefit from a local, central fund of knowledge (Moll et. al., 1992). By respecting the experience and perspective that teachers were bringing to the table and inviting them to contribute in meaningful ways to the design of the professional development, we felt that we were aligning ourselves more consistently with the values and approaches of the NWP.

The NWP model of teachers-teaching-teachers has embodied this approach of “empower[ing] teachers” (Whitney, 2008, p. 949) through professional development since 1974. Summer institutes to which teachers are invited create the center of each site of the NWP, the proverbial hub around which the wheel revolves. These experiences can lead to a feeling of transformation (Whitney, 2008) while looking completely different than what most people think of when the words professional development are uttered. The sense that the experience of participating in lessons as their students would gives NWP related PD work an underlying motto of *structure speaks*. In this sense, how people work together through a variety of experiences is what matters, not that individual teachers gain certain strategies or approaches, though they most certainly do (Whitney, et al, 2008). NWP work isn’t specifically tied to a single approach; in this sense, there isn’t a NWP way of teaching writing. While many other successful PD programs focus on the participants exclusively the NWP Invitational Summer Institute relies on everyone being a full participant; whatever is expected of the newcomers is also expected of the senior leaders of the program, from writing completed to developing presentations to participating in writing groups.

In the preparation for our new grant, we hoped to redesign our local project’s website to facilitate more active participation from teacher consultants in the network and to add a space for researching and writing with our participating teachers that did not require face-to-face interaction. In the fall of the first year of the grant, Nikki enrolled in a graduate course in the field of technical communication to learn more about the design concepts behind creating a web presence and teaching writing online. Surprisingly, while reading to find ideas for making the web space more usable, Nikki came upon a concept that helped us to refine our core approach to the professional development series as a whole. In “Ethics of Engagement: User-Centered Design and Rhetorical Methodology,” Michael Salvo explores how web designers and users interact in online spaces and describes several situations that illustrate the importance of involving users in the design of the online spaces they’ll be using. Salvo’s main point is that designers, who typically only gather information about the user’s experience after the design is complete, cannot design online spaces alone and that instead, the users must to be involved in the core design team from the outset.

We were immediately interested in the parallel to be drawn between the user/designer rapport and the teacher / pd provider rapport, as we felt it aligned closely to the tenor of NWP professional development structures. The case for teachers and professional development programs runs parallel: just as teachers can’t wait until a project’s completion to ask for student input, we can’t wait until

professional development has been disseminated to reflect on what has worked and what hasn't. Instead, our users – the teachers – have to be involved in the design process from the very beginning. Salvo explains, “User-centered and user-participatory approaches ... rely upon the user to provide information that the designer may not have even considered” (275). For us, as outsiders to the school community where we would be working, the establishment of a democratic workplace where teachers' expert knowledge would be valued was a critical first step of our program design.

Our essay draws on Salvo's concept of “participatory design” as a heuristic for facilitating a design process for our professional development aimed to help rural teachers shift their practices from focused on teaching the content of specific texts towards college and career ready standards with a focus on argumentative writing. Through our approach and the processes shared here, we aim to offer a potential model for others and another way of discussing what professional development might look and feel like if teachers are invited to collaborate with PD providers in the design and implementation of PD programs.

### **Participatory Design**

Participatory design, the user-centered strategy that seeks to “establish democratic workplaces where users are recognized as experts in their job while the expertise of designers is seen as a separate but equal expert knowledge” (Salvo, 2001, 273), invites users to join a democratic process of design. In order to put this theory into practice, we understood that we would need to loosen our hold on the reigns of the professional development and hand significant parts of the process over to our participating teachers. However, we also understood that we would need to balance carefully between the teachers' goals and the goals of our grant, creating a program that would empower teachers while also offering the support and resources that they needed. As we end our first year of the two-year cycle, we hope that by reflecting on the moves we made in our programming this year to enact participatory design that we can strengthen our commitment to the practice and use this experience as a model for other programs. By designing professional development with our users/teachers, our hope was to privilege participants in a way that both aligned with the NWP's values and strayed from most PD that we were witnessing on the ground in our participating district.

## **Design Characteristics and Process**

In “Open Systems and Citizenship: Designing a Departmental Web Site as an Open System,” Spinuzzi et al (2003) write about a website redesign project tasked with continuing to provide necessary information to site visitors while also creating a “civic forum” in which faculty could participate (168). They point to the monologic nature of the brochureware site as a hindrance to democratic participation and question how web developers can balance the goals of functional usability with the needs of empowering members to participate in the design and maintenance of sites. While a closed system is designed so that information can be easily consumed, the open system assumes what Spinuzzi et al refer to as a “collaborative” or “citizenship” model in which “documentation is open-ended, collaboratively modified, and continually renegotiated and adapted; control is distributed among the workers, who can use the system as a medium for producing, sharing, and validating knowledge” (171). Inspired by Spinuzzi et al, we began to think about how our site could create the same collaborative, shared space where teachers could work together to create and maintain a space rather than have all of the information controlled by an outsider.

In reflecting on our first year of phasing in participatory design, we’ve identified four essential practices that formed the backbone of our effort to apply a citizenship model to the professional development program that would allow teachers to construct their own knowledge: (1) implementation of a needs assessment; (2) creation of frequent and long-term opportunities for contact; (3) redesign of our website; and (4) use of Google Drive for collaboration. In the next sections, we describe each of these processes, focusing on their role in creating a participatory culture.

### **Needs Assessment**

Months before beginning the professional development program with teachers, we invited them out for lunch to talk about issues at play in their schools. Our two guiding questions were (1) What is it like to be a student in this community? and (2) What is it like to be a teacher in this community? Our sub-questions are listed in the table below.

Figure 1: Needs assessment questions
What is it like to be a student in this community?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do we know about student writing?</li> <li>• What do we want to know about student writing?</li> <li>• What do we know about student reading?</li> <li>• What do we want to know about student reading?</li> </ul>
What is it like to be a teacher in this community?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What PD have teacher received?</li> <li>• What PD do teachers want?</li> <li>• How comfortable are teachers with CCSS?</li> <li>• How is writing currently taught?</li> <li>• What goals do teachers have when it comes to students' writing?</li> <li>• What and how are students reading inside / outside of the classroom?</li> <li>• What goals do teachers have when it comes to students' reading?</li> <li>• Is their integration across disciplines? Is this something that interests teachers?</li> <li>• What are the logistics in play? (Rubrics? Curriculum maps? Planning time?)</li> <li>• What technology can teachers access? What do they need?</li> </ul>

The information that we gathered from these fairly informal conversations identified major issues at play that would impact our work. As Salvo notes, much of this information would have been invisible to us had we not involved our teachers in the early design process. For example, we learned that teachers were most concerned about two challenges: (1) a rigid testing schedule that they felt limited their autonomy in terms of scheduling units and (2) apathy among students. As we made our plans for the academic year, we were sure to keep these two issues in the foreground. In fact, during the summer before we began work in the district, we invited three in-service teachers to work with us in the creation of a logic model based on our collaborative interpretation of the results of the needs assessment. Aligned to the Common Core Anchor Standards, our model was divided into three categories: what students would demonstrate, what teachers would practice, and what Writing Project staff would offer through professional development sessions. This logic model then served as our template of professional development for the year.

At each of the monthly sessions, we planned to ask teachers to use the logic model to answer several questions that would help us to plan the next month's session. We hoped to invite teachers to tell us what they were reading and writing, to pose questions they hoped to research, and to share challenging or favorite experiences from the month along with their reflections on those

experiences. By creating a pipeline to hear directly from teachers about their experiences and interests, our hope was to tailor the professional development experience from month to month.

During our early needs assessment process, we were careful to provide plenty of opportunities for teachers to talk about successes. What we did not want to employ was a deficit model. Instead, we encouraged teachers to identify challenges but focus more on creating their “wish lists” for support they felt would help them address these challenges. Again, by empowering teachers to identify challenges and propose their own solutions, we made an important step towards redistributing power to those to whom it mattered most.

Unlike other programs of professional development that we had delivered in the past, this project took a grassroots approach, which began with the needs assessment. While we were well aware of the guiding ideas of our grant, we were also receptive to hearing from our future participants in terms of what they identified as their own interests and needs. Just like when we empower our students through choice, we hoped to empower our teachers by providing support in the areas that they requested, not only the areas we had identified on our own. We found this democratization of planning professional development on argumentative writing to be a powerful way to begin a long-term relationship with educators in the district.

### **Contact with Participants**

A second important characteristic of our professional development implementation plan was the long-term and frequent nature of our contact with participating teachers. In technical communication, one of the fundamental tenets of participatory design is frequent and long-term contact with users from the start of the design process. Michael Salvo (2001) explains this shift as one from the observation *of* users to participation *with* users in which new definitions are created for the designer, expert, and user roles (274). There are a number of reasons why we also found this to be relevant and important to our work. First, by establishing a weekly presence in our target schools, we were able to develop relationships with the teachers and become a part of the community in a way that isn't possible in daylong workshops or even monthly meetings. Through a mixture of formal and informal contact that took place at least once a week, we were able to get to know our teachers and their classroom situations.

By valorizing their classroom experiences, we were able to work with teachers to co-discover questions at the heart of their practice. When we asked teachers in the early fall for action-based research ideas, most of them struggled to



identify issues of interest to them. However, after spending weeks mining their experiences for ideas for their inquiry, we uncovered reams of potent questions on topics ranging from how to use poetry to teach argument to how choice might impact student investment in coursework. By talking with teachers during planning time each week and checking in on successes and challenges in the classroom, we were able to tease out some of the lines of inquiry that teachers had not yet had the opportunity to identify on their own.

This frequent contact also allowed us greater insight into teachers' practice and knowledge, an insight that helped us to enact our belief in constructivism and participatory design by valuing and responding to teachers' knowledge and perspectives. By checking in with teachers regularly, we were able to align our formal, monthly professional developments to what was happening in the classroom, a strategy which also made it more likely that our teachers would be able to integrate what they were learning in professional development into their classrooms. As one teacher noted, "The hardest part for me... was just trying to find a way to take something that was shared and make it fit in my classroom" (SRI International). Joellen Killion (2014) writes in the blog *Learning Forward's PD Watch*: "The integration of new knowledge and skills occurs when people try out their new understanding, apply it in their work on a regular basis, have opportunities to reflect on and analyze their own practice, receive feedback and support from a trusted coach, and refine their practice over time" (Killion). Rather than dropping in and depositing information into the teachers' funds of knowledge, we used our strategy of frequent contact and collaboration to create a structure that could support the analysis and reflection that we knew we needed to employ. Just as technical communicators enacting the methodology of participatory design, we also recognized the expertise of both PD providers and teachers as a separate but equal expert knowledge.

### **Website Redesign**

Beyond our face-to-face weekly meetings and monthly professional development sessions, we also hoped to collaborate with teachers online. As is often the case for Writing Project sites, our host university is a distance from many of our target schools, which can make frequent contact challenging. To address this challenge, we also worked hard to make the best use of online spaces (Niesz, 2007, Potash & Oxford, 2010).

For participating teachers in our network, there are very few opportunities for collaboration. Because of the rural nature of our site, many of our teachers comprise the entire grade or even entire department in their schools. With few

curriculum coordinators, literacy coaches, or department chairs, teachers in rural schools often struggle to connect to a larger community of networks, resulting in teacher isolation and sometimes even abandonment of the profession all together. In an effort to support our rural teachers and connect all teachers in the network to professional conversations happening in the world of literacy education, we hoped to create a digital space where teachers could exchange ideas with other educators. Ultimately, this supported space could have a direct impact in the quality of writing teaching and student writing achievement.

As we mentioned, our work with participatory design was originally inspired by an attempt to rework our website. Originally designed as what technical communicators call “brochureware,” which accuses organizations of taking the text of their printed brochures and translating it to the Web, we hoped to transform the site to a more collaborative space where users don’t just consume information but also contribute. This collaborative space is essentially an iteration of participatory design referred to as “open system design” in which “documentation is open-ended, collaboratively modified, and continually renegotiated and adapted; control is distributed among the workers, who can use the system as a medium for producing, sharing, and validating knowledge” (Spinuzzi et. al. 171). Through our site, we hoped to create a space that teachers wouldn’t just visit when they needed to check the calendar but would be compelled to read and contribute to regularly. We also hoped to cultivate an environment where teachers see themselves as working together *with* the Writing Project rather than *for* it. Figure 2 outlines the major components of our redesign concept.

Figure 2: Major components of the website redesign project	
Opportunities for collaboration	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open system for control of calendar, announcements, and updates</li> <li>• Shared control of blog space with opportunities for teachers to post content and link to their own blogs</li> <li>• Teacher resource wiki for sharing teaching materials</li> <li>• Collaborative library space for shared curation of mentor texts and resources</li> <li>• Online book study opportunity, create and maintained by teachers, Teacher Consultants, and Writing Project staff</li> <li>• Connections to social media – Facebook and Twitter – to promote informal posting and collaboration</li> </ul>	

By planning to redesign our online space, our hope is to encourage participating teachers and teacher consultants to claim ownership of the space rather than become passive users or consumers of information. Through the open

system design, we are be inviting participants to come together in a forum that supports the collaboration and community building that educators – especially those isolated in rural areas – need. Through their participation in the grant, our current teachers/users are situated to become not only recipients of the content posted to the site, but also generators of this content. Although our initial reimagining of our online space was centralized, we do plan to bring our ideas and plans to the participants for input, therefore this design should be understood as a starting point rather than an ending point. Beyond the scope of the original grant, we hope that this space will become a collaborative space where teachers from across our region can share and find perspectives, resources, and ideas.

### **Collaboration with Google Drive**

We found it essential to create a structure that valued all participants equally, and we hoped to empower our teachers by allowing them to create online spaces along with us rather than merely consume the information that we deemed most important. In addition to reimagining our web presence, we also worked with teachers using the collaborative features of Google Drive. First, we gave everyone access to a Google Drive folder where we were all able to upload and access documents. Logistically, this helped to give us all easy access to notes, resources, student writing samples, and other documents. Politically, in the way that it redistributed power, this approach helped us to create a space where our users would also bring resources to the table. All of the power of sharing did not need to be retained by our staff; we knew it was important for teachers to be able to contribute as well.

After conducting our weekly meetings, we typically came back to the office with a variety of requests for help – from collecting text sets to reconceiving previously-taught units within the frame of argument writing – and our original approach was to find this information and bring it back to teachers ourselves. As the year went on, and in an effort to align ourselves with participatory design, we began to rethink this unsustainable structure, and ultimately decided to put these requests out on Drive where Writing Project staff and all 13 participating teachers could contribute to the gathering of resources. Figure 3 shows an example of one of these collaborative documents. While the first few examples were added by Writing Project staff, participating teachers, following the suggested structure, posted their own assignment descriptions and links.

Figure 3: Collaborative document, rhetorical analysis

## Rhetorical Analysis Assignment Ideas

There are TONS of options for how kids can write a literary or rhetorical analysis. Here are a few ideas:

- **Essay:** If you have the time, consider guiding students through analyzing the context and text of the piece in a formal, thesis-driven essay.
  - Click [here](#) for example student essays, written by seniors and college freshmen
  - Click [here](#) for example essays written by teacher consultants using texts you're teaching in your classrooms.
- **Annotated bibliography:** If students are curating sources for work on a larger project, ask them to create an annotated bibliography that summarizes, analyzes, and reflects on each source.
  - Click [here](#) for the assignment Jenn gives her 12th graders and [here](#) and [here](#) for model responses.
  - Click [here](#) for an example assignment from Tom, director of a Writing Project.
- **Short response to multimodal texts:** Do this in mini-lessons throughout the year. Choose an aspect of a text – diction, sentence structure, tone – to spotlight, and ask kids to read like a writer, thinking about why the writer made the choices he did.
  - Click [here](#) for a PDF of a few pages of the novel I'm reading and [here](#) for an example of what I might ask my students to write or talk about.
  - Click [here](#) for an example photo and [here](#) for some analysis questions to ask students about the photo.
  - Click [here](#) for access to Chris' presentation using song lyrics for analysis.
- **Handout:** If you don't have time for a HUGE project and your kids need a little more guidance, consider making them a handout that walks them through the steps of analysis.
  - Click [here](#) for an example from Brenda of her kiddos engaged in a rhetorical analysis of propaganda.
  - Click [here](#) for an example from Katy, Writing Project TC and teacher in Springdale, helping kids analyze a selection of text from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.
- **Socratic seminar:** Choose a brief passage to analyze. Allow students with devices to look up information about the author and context (or provide this information). Engage the inner circle in analyzing the context; ask the second inner circle to focus on analyzing how the text works. Allow students time after the seminar to reflect and make conclusions.
  - Talk to Scott about what he did with the *Declaration of Independence*.

- **Think / Pair / Share:** Take a moment when you're engaged in reading any text, and ask students to consider how the writer is doing something. For example, if we've established that the mood of the piece is one of solitude, pause students for a moment to consider *how* that mood was crafted. How does the author convey meaning, achieve a purpose, or create an effect?
- **Journal entry:** Every analysis doesn't have to be a full-blown essay. Students can consider craft any day that they are reading or writing. Have them record a few thoughts in their writing journals along the way. Consider sharing something you're reading, remarking on the "how" of the text rather than the "what."

We also composed all of our documents using Google Docs, which was crucial as it allowed us to collaborate easily. Had we been working with PDFs or even a PowerPoint or Word document, we felt that teachers would feel less invited to contribute. Composing everything from meeting minutes to agendas in Google Docs allowed us to cultivate a transformative space that helped to enact the balance of power on which our relationships with our teachers was based. For example, though we had invited them to comment on our meeting agendas from the beginning, we did not actually receive any feedback until we converted our agendas into Google Documents. Rather than giving teachers what seemed to be a finished document when sent in MS Word or as a PDF, we received much more feedback when we composed in Google Docs, as these documents were perceived as works in progress, and teachers felt more comfortable contributing.

We moved away from handouts as well, realizing that teachers needed to be given the opportunity to create their own understanding. For example, near the end of the year, we began to discuss implementing a 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade portfolio process. In preparation for this discussion, we originally created a handout with all of the information concerning portfolio considerations pre-digested. At the last minute, we threw out this original handout (figure 4), opting instead to give teachers the research from which we had created the first handout and a blank page of questions (figure 5) to consider. We also changed the language slightly by adding the pronouns "we" and "our" to create a more personalized and local set of questions. The resulting conversations were rich and deep, and teachers were more empowered and engaged, having been allowed the time and resources to consider the topic for themselves.

Figure 4: Portfolio initiative, original	
What is a portfolio?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The portfolio is a collection of work curated by a student to show understanding and growth over time.</li> </ul>
Who are the intended audiences, and how will the audiences use the portfolio?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will understand and reflect on their own learning in order to become stronger writers.</li> <li>• Teachers will gain a better sense of what students know and are able to do and how they can help students continue to grow as writers.</li> <li>• Administrators will understand what student writing looks like in their schools and what their teachers are doing to improve student writing achievement.</li> </ul>
What types of formative and summative artifacts will be curated in the portfolio?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writers' logs</li> <li>• Portfolio reflection</li> <li>• Sample peer responses</li> <li>• Sample annotation</li> <li>• Final drafts (with comments) of culminating writing assignments</li> </ul>

Figure 5: Portfolio initiative, revised	
What kind of portfolio will we assemble?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which learning targets will be the focus of our portfolios?</li> <li>• Based on purpose and target(s), which pieces of evidence will we include?</li> <li>• What kinds of annotations will students make on each piece?</li> <li>• What kinds of reflection on the overall contents will students engage in?</li> <li>• When and with whom will we share the portfolios?</li> <li>• How will we organize the materials?</li> <li>• How will portfolios be used to target teacher learning?</li> </ul>

We were not the only record keepers; we were not the only ones to set the agendas; we were not the only providers of resources and these messages were crucial to our project, as they helped teachers to see that this was not another professional development program to be tolerated. Instead, we hoped that our open system design methodology would help show teachers that they were major players in the creation of *their* program. Figure 6 is a selection from the agenda for one of our spring meetings; this agenda was co-constructed with teachers, based on the topics they had identified as central to their own inquiry.

Figure 6: Collaborative agenda
Part 1: Roundtable discussion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lunch topics: Socratic seminars; avoiding plagiarism; Benchmark prep integrated with argument (15 min per)</li> </ul>
Part 2: Where are we headed and why?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review results from last week:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Analyzing student writing (1)</li> <li>○ Researching and documenting arguments (2)</li> <li>○ Supporting claims with evidence (3)</li> <li>○ Other ideas: motivation / genuine inquiry</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Part 3: How can sentence frames help students construct arguments?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read preface and introduction to <i>They Say, I Say</i> If time, browse through other interesting sections.</li> <li>• Think about how you might use this as a building block in your argumentative units. / How does this connect to what you're already doing with rhetorical analysis?</li> <li>• Share ideas</li> </ul>
Part 4: What options do we have for culminating writing assignments?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group discussion, reflection, and planning             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Read Google Doc with ideas for generating topics and possible assignment types; Think about your question.</li> <li>○ Each team will have 3 minutes to explain their context to understand the question or challenge they'd like to present to the group. At the end of the 3 minutes, clearly state the question or challenge. The group will then have 7 minutes to respond.</li> <li>○ Reflect, as a group, and make plans for assignments.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

All events in this sequence originated from teachers' questions. First, teachers were invited to propose topics to discuss during lunch, and Writing Project staff would choose the most oft-requested topics to bring to the table. During the second component, we discussed the results from a survey we had completed the previous week that asked teachers to rank their most pressing concerns. The survey was constructed collaboratively by Writing Project staff and participating teachers, and the results of the survey determined the next step of the PD. In the third component, we worked with sentence frames, as some teachers had heard others referring to templates, and they wanted to know more about them. Deliberately, we provided teachers with their own copies of a primary source – *The Say, I Say* – because we wanted them to feel empowered by digesting the information themselves. It would have been faster to have given them a handout of templates, but we wanted teachers to have access to the reasoning behind the material so that they would understand not just a strategy but a methodology: we wanted to help teachers think about the theory behind the work rather than about the activity alone. Finally, during the last session of the

day, we invited teachers to share ideas with one another for culminating writing projects. Because writing had not been a focus for many teachers in the past, this practice not only helped teachers to cultivate ideas for long-term writing projects, but it also helped to nourish a budding community in which writing would be supported. When the Writing Project is no longer on site, our hope is that administrators will continue to support this shared space that allows teachers to collaborate. Rather than always receiving professional development from the outside, we hope that teachers who have participated in this Writing Project grant will be empowered to provide PD to one another.

## Conclusion

When we conduct needs assessments with districts in the future, we will retain many of the same approaches, though we also hope to bring in student voices. As we work with teachers to improve the teaching of writing, we also need to constantly be reminded that our ultimate goal is to improve student performance, and in order to do so, we need to bring students directly into the conversation as well. Professional development created by outsiders for teachers does not function as well as professional development created through collaboration with teachers. However, professional development created with teachers but without students is also missing a critical element, and this is an element that our project intends to embrace in the future. In order to enact the methodology of participatory design in our work, we must consult with all users early on so that we might co-interpret our context and collaborate to construct the emerging professional development design.

When designers design spaces with users in mind but without users at the drawing table, they miss out on a critical component. In “Ethics of Engagement” Salvo (2001) writes, “...in a postmodern age, with a dialogic disposition, it becomes an ethical imperative to increase feedback from users to designers” (288). When it comes to our users (teachers) and designers (Writing Project staff), we feel similarly: in order to provide high-quality, responsive professional development that will impact teachers and students, we must incorporate all parties into the design process.

But there is no doubt about the fact that it is quite intimidating to waltz into a school district and start handing over the reigns. What ultimately drove us to do this to certain extents--our process was gradual--was the fact that we wanted these teachers to see the value of fostering inquiry in their own work in hopes that it would naturally transfer. The CRWP grant afforded us the luxury of walking into the building with a two-year commitment to the work from the teachers and



school district. We had time, a commodity so often lacking or at risk in similar situations. Moreover, teaching writing isn't a skillset or defined set of practices that can be wrapped up into a neat program. It is recursive, complicated, organic, messy and much like learning to teach writing and writing itself requires a good number of "shitty first drafts." (Lamott, 2007, 21). Teaching others to teach writing can be learned though, as the *structure speaks* motto helps us remember. If we ever expect teachers to take approaches back to their classrooms, we must steadfastly model them as leaders of professional development. Especially in today's educational environment, when teachers are already struggling to maintain their autonomy and voice, professional development provides a vital symbolic starting point for educators to exercise their power and enact change.

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