



2020

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Troy Hicks
Central Michigan University, hickstro@gmail.com

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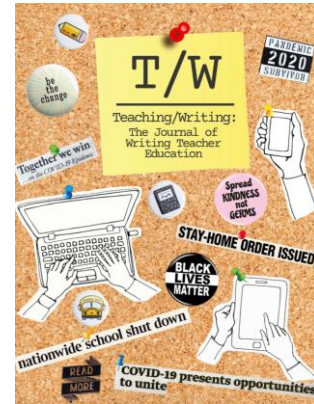
Hicks, Troy (2020) "Rethinking the Teaching of Writing in an Era of Remote Learning: Lessons Learned from a Local Site of the National Writing Project," *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol9/iss1/8>

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Rethinking the Teaching of Writing in an Era of Remote Learning: Lessons Learned from a Local Site of the National Writing Project



Troy Hicks, *Central Michigan University*

When teachers are given the opportunity to imagine professional learning experiences for themselves, as well as the autonomy to do so, the results have the potential to be career-changing, as the National Writing Project (NWP) has demonstrated for decades (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Whitney, 2008). The need for these opportunities are strong in normal times, and especially in the midst of a global pandemic, as we have all experienced in the spring of 2020.

In late March and early April of 2020, as we in Michigan were beginning to feel the ripples of what billions of others around the world had already felt, teachers affiliated with the Chippewa River Writing Project (CRWP) at Central Michigan University began to contact me. Texts. Tweets. Emails. Phone calls. Zoom meetings. Writing groups. As the site director, I found that I was engaging in a similar conversation with about half a dozen colleagues, all of us trying to figure out what would work to support our K-12 students as writers. This began first in mid-March with “enrichment only” activities and — after Governor Gretchen Whitmer ended the K-12 school year in early April by providing increased flexibility and loosened restrictions — as we shifted into an era of “remote learning.”

It is in this moment where the lessons of the NWP were brought to bear during a time unlike any of us had ever experienced. In their descriptions of teacher transformations, Lieberman and Friedrich outline the ways in which teachers who are connected with the NWP undergo significant change, as well as the values that these teacher leaders carry into their schools and communities. These traits include “Advocating what’s right for students,” “Opening the classroom door and going public with teaching,” and “Learning and reflecting on practice as a teacher and leader” (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010, p. 95). In a time where COVID-19 has ravaged the world, and over 1.37 billion students have moved to some form of “remote learning” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020), teacher leaders were again holding on to these principled traits of flexibility, resilience, and openness. They are principles and traits as relevant now, in an era of virtual teaching, as they have ever been before.



Thus, as I began to reply to another round of individual messages from my CRWP colleagues, on March 31, 2020, I instead issued an email invitation (Personal Communication, March 31, 2020) that read, in part:

First, I hope that all is well with you and your families. With another month of sheltering in place on the horizon, the Hicks household underwent some major shifting of bedroom arrangements with our five teens this weekend. More physical and emotional space was created, and things are much better as we start this week. Hope things are OK with you, too.

Second, as you may know, CRWP has been struggling in the past few years to get a consistent PD plan in place. In the Rahm Emanuel-ian spirit of not letting a good crisis go to waste -- and with \$13.5 billion heading to schools (Ujifusa, 2020) and CRWP set to make some major announcements about the rest of the K-12 school year -- CRWP needs to get some things organized.

Now.

To that end, I would appreciate having you -- those who are tech-minded -- consider an invitation to be part of a team, task force, working group, meeting of the minds... whatever we might call it... that can do two things, and do them very quickly:

- Prepare a series of one-hour, scheduled webinars that will be launched the week of April 13th and stretch to near the "end" of what would have been the normal academic year. These will be advertised as free, live events, and the archived recordings will be made available on the CRWP website.
- A comprehensive package of PD that we can offer, beginning this summer, and delivered in either a hybrid or fully online format. We need to put every idea on the table, and think about what we might do for individual teachers (online institutes?) as well as to contract with school districts (online PD in single sessions, or over time?).

It is here where our story of continued contact and support through the early days of COVID closures really begins, yet a brief bit of NWP history provides additional context for what emerged from this email and subsequent conversations.

The National Writing Project's Work in the Context of COVID-19

Stepping back from the pandemic, it is worth noting a few key points that provide context for our local site's response. For over four decades, the NWP has offered "signature professional development and leadership programs for teachers and faculty, as well as designing customized inservice programs for local schools, districts, and higher education institutions" (n.d.). As a site of the NWP, the CRWP has worked since 2009 to support the

mission of both organizations by improving the teaching and learning of writing in Michigan's schools and local communities. CMU faculty and local teachers involved in the CRWP have focused outreach activities about the teaching and learning of writing over the past ten years in mid- and northern Michigan.

Historically, the NWP has relied on a model of “teachers teaching teachers” as a way to enact transformational change within and beyond the invitational summer institute. NWP professional learning is characterized by listening to the voices and concerns of teachers, and inviting them to share their work as writers. Moreover, as I have argued, professional learning requires that “teachers must volunteer to participate” and “have choice over its content, and be active learners within the event” (Hicks & Sailors, 2018, p. 4), both ideas very much aligned with NWP principles. These beliefs have guided me as I've directed our writing project for over ten years, and remained true in a time of pandemic pedagogy.

Thus, CRWP teachers began to make meaning of what was happening, as they had been tasked with the goal of offering “continuity of learning” to their students. As they were providing experiences for their students that ranged from, on the one hand, brief announcements with hyperlinks to enrichment activities to, on the other hand, fully online, synchronous learning sessions, the CRWP teachers wanted to continue thinking about these models together. By making our practice public, we felt that we could work through a design and development phase of flexible learning options.

Beyond that, we knew that a shift in tone would need to emerge. As phrases like “connection before content” and “Maslow's before Bloom's” circulated on social media and in virtual staff meetings, we noted a general tone in the early days of triage teaching that could be summed up like this: for now, we should just aim to do good enough. Yet, as writing project teachers, we were concerned that doing just “good enough,” or as we have heard it elsewhere, “satisficing,” a blend of the words “satisfy” and “suffice,” coined in the 1950s by the economist Herbert Alexander Simon (Interaction Design Foundation, n.d.), we were not doing enough at all. In the spirit of making our practice public by sharing knowledge, insights, and activities that could be useful for other educators, we decided to move our private conversations into a series of webinars.

Making Practice Public Through Weekly Webinars: “Continuity of (Our Own Professional) Learning”

Given the feelings that many educators were encouraged to do just enough to get by, we felt that simply putting our existing teaching practices online was not enough; if it was, we could have recorded screencasts of our conversations and shared them. Instead, we began to plan a series of weekly webinars that would be best experienced as live, synchronous one-hour Zoom sessions on Tuesdays at 4:00 PM EST, yet would be archived for later viewing. In our advertising materials, we argued that our goal, then, was more than just “moving online.” Registration was required so we could provide participants with a secure

Zoom link, and ensure that we would not go over our maximum room allotment of 100. To that end, active participation during the scheduled sessions was encouraged as we invited participants to use their webcams and microphones, as well as to participate in synchronous activities.

Framed as an opportunity for sharing ideas, we noted in the advertising materials that “Teacher consultants leading these sessions are, like you, working under ‘stay home, stay safe’ orders and are working to engage students in meaningful learning activities.” We noted that individuals in the webinar would participate in activities together, as learners, and have time for questions, conversation, and planning for next steps. Moreover, recognizing the challenges of remote learning, we aimed to address strategies for managing equity and access, supporting students’ socio-emotional health as well as our own struggles with the abrupt end of the school year, and a number of other concerns that we knew would continue to emerge during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Responding to the felt needs of the CRWP teacher consultants — and based on feedback we gained from participants as they filled out the registration form — we designed sessions across eight weeks with titles that include:

- Remote Learning without Ubiquitous Internet Access
- Reasonable Expectations for Remote Learning
- Facilitating Effective Online Class Sessions Through Video Chat
- Promising Experiences for Student Writers
- PBL at Home: Designing Meaningful Research Projects
- Learning How to Learn Online as Professionals
- Staying Connected as Teacher-Writers
- Open Forum: Next Steps in Learning Continuity

And, in the context of these eight sessions, we have explored a variety of tools include:

- Google Voice as a tool for connecting with students who may not have reliable internet service and yet want to leave voice messages or send text/images through SMS;
- Padlet and Jamboard as spaces for collaboration and resource sharing;
- Zoom, Google Meet, and other video conferencing tools, including strategies for engaging students during a video call session;
- Scheduling tools for booking writing conferences, including Microsoft Bookings and YouCanBookMe; and
- Spaces for exploring argumentative writing and topics including AllSides, ProCon.org, and Kialo.

At this time of this manuscript submission, we are halfway through the series, and we continue to document our learning through archives of the webinars, digital handouts and slides, and other materials, all publicly available. Though modest in scope, each session (to date) has had at least 20 participants, many of whom have joined in week after week. The planning for — and discussions during — these webinar sessions, then, led us to develop a second opportunity, a two-week open institute scheduled for June 2020. Recordings are available at: <<https://bit.ly/CRWP-COPL>>

An Open Institute Emerges: “Remote Literacy Learning: Promising Practices for Online Classrooms”

With further discussion during our planning and sessions themselves, we knew that we could continue creating professional learning opportunities for our colleagues, and for ourselves. At risk of stating an obvious truth, online learning is different than what happens in the classroom. As an April 24, 2020 blog post on *Edutopia* suggested, “teachers need to be very intentional about monitoring how students are doing” and we know that “we want students to take ownership of and lead their learning, and that’s even more necessary in a virtual space” requiring us to carefully scaffold students’ learning, maximize synchronous meetings for coaching, and provide timely, efficient feedback (McCarthy, 2020).

Knowing that we wanted to further our discussions of online learning — as well as teaching writing in online spaces — a smaller subset of the facilitators from the weekly webinar series began the process of designing an open institute. To be offered as a two-week, 36-hour intensive professional development experience from June 15 to 26, 2020, the institute will rely on whole- and small-group Zoom sessions as well as innovative asynchronous activities that will model best practices in online literacy learning. We will engage in daily, synchronous work from 9:00 AM to 12:15 PM on weekdays, with additional opportunities scheduled at participants’ convenience or in a fully asynchronous format.

With the goal of designing a series of flexible lessons/unit plans that participants can use during the 2020-21 school year, we are imagining a general format in which we will:

- Engage in a “writing into the day” from about 9:00 to 9:15 AM. With a prompt sent the night before, participants will make time to write before we join the community at 9:00, and will then have a few minutes to share.
- On most days, we will then transition into a teaching demonstration from 9:15 to 10:30, where one experienced teacher consultant will lead us through a synchronous activity that illustrates best practices in his/her remote teaching context. On other days, we will engage in discussions and other group activities.
- On the days of the demos, after a brief break, we will return at 10:45 to engage in “collaborative responses to teaching demonstrations” (Swenson & Mitchell, 2006), and we will document what worked well for us as learners and writers in a

synchronous, virtual environment, as well as how we might adapt and extend the lesson into our own teaching context.

- Later in the morning and — as arranged by the facilitators — we will then move through a series of mini workshops, looking at a variety of other technologies for teaching writing remotely, as well as engage in writing response groups.
- Then, in the afternoons and evenings, participants will be provided with multiple opportunities to engage in asynchronous, yet still substantive writing instruction. Through examples of instructional screencasts, inquiry-driven HyperDocs (2019), and other online lessons, the teacher leaders who are facilitating the institute will invite participants to explore a variety of tools and techniques that could be adapted to their own virtual classrooms.

Unlike a traditional summer institute in which the teacher participants would be coached to create their own teaching demonstration, the limited time frame of our open institute will force us to have them produce a series of lessons (or brief unit plan) instead. These would be plans that are ready-to-use in August, whether the participants' school would be in face-to-face session, online, or in a hybrid mode. And, while we are not entirely sure what it would look like, we also imagine participants in this summer institute perhaps continuing their work in the 2020-21 academic year, in an “alternative model” of the traditional summer institute (e.g., Jaxon, 2018; Martin, 2015).

In combination, the webinar series and open institute will provide us with multiple opportunities to engage in substantive interactions with educators from multiple grade levels and teaching contexts, all compelled to become better at teaching writing. If ever there was a time when the NWP's mantra of writing, learning, and leading will guide our work, these weeks and months ahead are those times.

Conclusion

Though we are still in the midst of the COVID crisis and have no way to know, with certainty, when and how we might go back to the “new normal,” I am convinced that our frameworks for teaching and learning writing need to change. Even as a small few districts (prematurely) announce plans for their students to return to a socially-distanced, hybrid model of learning in the fall of 2020, many hundreds of others, in Michigan and beyond, are still left waiting for direction from state education officials and politicians, let alone public health experts and, I might add, those with expertise in digital literacy and learning.

The road from now, at the end of May to August 2020 will, assuredly, be dotted with many pit stops (and pitfalls) for professional learning. As I work with my colleagues from our local site, I am reminded that teacher leaders are the ones who make the most impact in

their classrooms, schools, and communities, and I am looking forward to learning with them. Reflecting this in my work, both as a leader in professional development and as an author, has been a personal priority. For over a decade, beginning in earnest with my book *The Digital Writing Workshop* (2009) and right up to my current books, co-authored with CRWP Teacher Consultants (Hicks, Hylar, & Pangle., 2020; Hicks & Schoenborn, 2020), I have continued to advocate for the role of teacher leaders in their classrooms, schools, and communities. The summer of 2020 will reinforce these opportunities for elevating teachers' voices.

Through this COVID-tainted spring, I have again been reminded of the power of the NWP model, and appreciate the continued relationships that I have with colleagues from my local site and the national network. As we close our webinar series, plan for our open institute, and look ahead to the 2020-21 academic year, we will need to continue to rethink the teaching of writing in an era of remote learning. For me, situating this work in the work of an NWP site provides us with the intellectual and emotional space that we need in order to turn our current thinking into future changes in our teaching.

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