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It Takes a Community: One NWP Site's Approach to Establishing and Sustaining a Writing Community

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It Takes a Community: One NWP Site's Approach to Establishing and Sustaining a Writing Community

Cover Page Footnote
Thank you to the National Writing Project of Acadiana (NWP-A) and all the people who are part of this wonderful writing community.
It Takes a Community: One NWP Site's Approach to Establishing and Sustaining a Writing Community

H. Michelle Kreamer, University of Louisiana at Lafayette

Getting started with a new piece of writing is hard. Any writer will tell you this. What makes this even more difficult is the idea many of us have of what writing should be, what our process should entail, and what we should accomplish by the end of a day (or hour) of writing. When I was about 12 years old, I decided I wanted to write a novel. I went into my room, three-subject notebook and black Bic pen in hand proclaiming to my parents, “I’m starting my book—no one interrupt me.” I toiled away longer than I ever had on a single piece of writing at that point, so, maybe two hours if I’m being honest with myself. While I wrote between 8 to 10 hand-written pages in that single session, nothing ever became of my aspirations to be a bestselling pre-teen writer. While a number of factors contributed to this, one thing I was missing was a writing community. When I wavered the next day, choosing to pick up someone else’s book instead of working on my own, I didn’t have a group of fellow writers to turn to who would encourage me to keep writing, to give feedback, or to listen to my words. Since then, I have realized the value of a writing community, and fortunately, I have had the opportunity to become part of a community of writers.

As the story goes, in the summer of 1974 James Gray and colleagues came together at the University of California, Berkeley to participate in an intensive professional development dedicated to writing and the teaching of writing utilizing a model of “teachers-teaching-teachers” (NWP, 2024). With a focus on supporting teachers as writers and writing instructors, these educational innovators knew the power of getting a group of educators together in a room with a common goal. Since then, the National Writing Project (NWP) has spread throughout the country and beyond. In an examination of two NWP sites, Wood and Liberman (2002) found that the success of the organization comes from “a distinctive set of social practices that motivate teachers, make learning accessible, and build an ongoing professional community; and networks that organize and sustain relationships among these communities and produce new and revitalizing forms of support, commitment, and leadership” (para. 4). As NWP celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, the
emphasis on creating and supporting community is still as important today as it was all those years ago.

**The Value of Writing Communities**

Educators understand the power of community. At the beginning of the school year, much effort is made to welcome students to the classroom, encourage peers to get to know each other, and provide a space where students feel comfortable to learn, grow, and explore. When discussing classroom communities, Tompkins (2019) identifies respect, high expectations, collaboration, choice, and responsibility as required elements. Whitaker (2005) states, “Students should feel they are a part of a community of people supporting each other in developing as writers, readers, and thinkers” (p. 1). Fortunately, teachers can serve as key influences in helping students see themselves as a part of a classroom, literary, or writing community. Vetter (2010) described a classroom in which the teacher “positioned students as insiders of a writing community,” (p. 55) through modeling think-alouds of her own writing, having students share writing with peers, and facilitating discussion about writing. In doing so, students who may not have considered themselves writers began to take on a writing identity and became members of a classroom writing community. By forming a community of practice, participants can “develop, negotiate, and share meaning; create and merge identities; and…experience deep learning in and about their practice” (Skerrett, 2013, p. 328-329.) For pre-service teachers who became part of a poetry reading and writing community, exposure to a variety of poetry and writing prompts/exercises, participation in writing workshops, and opportunities to share their writing were key in supporting them as writers (Certo et al., 2012).

While fostering writing communities within classroom settings is a great start in aiding students in discovering their writing identity and increasing writing confidence, Skerrett (2013) notes the benefit of “[e]ncouraging young people’s participation in multiple interconnected communities of substantive literacy learning…[which] provides numerous opportunities to foster literate identities” (p. 352). In this way, students do not only consider themselves writers within school settings, but they also begin to identify as writers within any and all spaces. One way to encourage this is to have authentic opportunities for creating and sharing one’s writing. Sharing writing at a local venue (Certo et al., 2012) or composing writing that will appear on a blog, class website, or book (Kinloch & Drew, 2009) are just some ideas for teachers to encourage their students to share their writing with a larger audience. Furthermore, the importance of community is beneficial for writers at any stage of life. Writing can often be seen as a solitary task. For Gayle (2021), the dream of being a full-time writer quickly turned into a lonely experience until he found fellow writers and became part of an online writing community.
Interestingly, despite teachers being skilled at creating communities within their own classrooms, Smith and Sivo (2012) explain that “teachers often practice their crafts in ‘silos’” (p. 880), which can make it difficult to engage in communities of their own. The researchers suggest that they can break these barriers by engaging in online teaching communities to share ideas and experiences. For many, the NWP has connected them to a large community of fellow educators. At one NWP site, teachers came together, crafted editorials about teaching, and submitted these for publication consideration in a local paper (Perrillo, 2010). This was an opportunity for teachers to join a writing community while “taking greater ownership of one’s work and facilitating a public conversation about education” (p. 26). According to Wood and Liberman (2002), the NWP provides teachers with an entry into local site networks where they can share expertise to support their teaching practices and simultaneously “create communities of professionals in pursuit of constant improvement of their practice” (“Developing Local Networks,” para. 3). Since writing and teaching can both be isolating endeavors, forming a community, whether virtually or in-person, is critical as it can serve as a source of connection and inspiration.

Community Events

As director of the National Writing Project of Acadiana (NWP-A), maintaining and continually cultivating a writing community has become a top priority in supporting members of the organization. In particular, a goal of the site’s leadership team is to continue to impact writing and writing instruction within the local community, all through grassroot efforts. Through a series of free or low-cost, community-focused events, we have continued to thrive as an NWP site and as writers. Since one core tenet of the NWP is that everyone is a writer, providing opportunities for writing is one way our site embodies this belief. The remainder of this section includes an overview of various events that NWP-Acadiana facilitates, hosts, or participates in. While some events are specific to our geographic region, with minor adjustments, these are recommended practices to establish, grow, or sustain any writing community.

Annual Writing Marathon

The New Orleans Writing Marathon (NOWM) has a tradition of bringing writers together. Created by Richard Louth of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project in 1994, the writing marathon “gives everyone a chance to write on anything they want and to share their writing in small groups, with no criticism, while experiencing the city as writers” (Louth, 2015, para. 1). Drawing on work from Goldberg’s (1986) Writing Down the Bones and Hemingway’s (1964) concept of place in A Moveable Feast, the NOWM combines these ideas as writers explore the French Quarter observing, writing, and sharing. While this marathon has ranged
from one to five full days of writing, this can easily be modified to fit the needs and interests of any group.

Each summer, our NWP site emulates this event by hosting a day-long writing marathon. Generally, there are around 20 attendees each year. Many participants are teachers, including K-12 educators, higher education professors, and retired educators, as well as community members who simply enjoy writing and the written word. To begin the day, everyone gathers at a local venue and participates in a writing exercise led by a member of the site leadership team. The opening writing exercise varies and can stem from anything! Then, like in New Orleans, participants head off in different directions in small groups for a day of exploration, inspiration, and writing. At the end of the day, everyone reconvenes to share something they produced that day. Guided by the National Writing Project principle that everyone is a writer, this annual event is an opportunity to connect with others interested in writing, have dedicated time to write, and a space to share one’s work. For classroom teachers who might be unable to take a trip to a new venue like the one described here, a mini-marathon could be planned that allows students to explore their school, observing familiar sights through a new lens. Then, teachers could have students share their writing by providing a time for Author’s Chair (Tompkins, 2019), in which students take turns sitting in a designated chair to read their original works to their peers.

Ayotte (2016) acknowledges that sharing one’s writing can be intimidating, but explains that through a writing community, we can improve in our craft. Reflecting on our NWP site’s annual marathon, one participant said, “I didn’t consider myself a writer until I attended the National Writing Project of Acadiana’s writing marathon…it’s an amazing experience that has really helped with considering myself a writer and knowing the creative process.” In this way, the participant became part of the writing community and was able to strengthen their identity as a writer, reinforcing the NWP ideal that everyone is a writer. For our NWP site, the writing marathon serves as an anchor each year, bringing together seasoned writers, as well as those who have yet to realize they are, in fact, writers.

**Short Story Society**

Given the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing (Urquhart & Frazee, 2012), starting a book club seemed like a natural way to connect with others as part of an on-going event series. While our NWP site initially hosted a virtual book club, inconsistent and low attendance proved to be a challenge along with “Zoom fatigue” that accompanied another online event. However, a good friend and fellow NWP site director said we had to “keep going and keep showing up!” Thankfully, through creative problem solving and collaboration, Short Story Society (SSS) was born.
Each month, a different facilitator is asked to lead SSS. To do this, they select two short stories freely available online that participants read prior to the event. Then, at the in-person gathering, the facilitator guides discussion about the stories and leads the group (usually between 6 to 12 people each month) in a writing exercise that is connected to the readings in some way. For many English Language Arts (ELA) teachers, this is similar to what is already happening in the classroom. Students read an assigned text and then engage in discussion about said text, at times, adding a written component. For the writing exercises led during SSS, creativity is ever-present. Whether there is a thematic connection between the stories and writing exercise or perhaps a prompt that encourages writing in a similar style, genre, or tone as that of the story, attendees are encouraged to flex their creative muscle using the stories as mentor texts. Table 1 includes a brief explanation of a writing exercise created and led by two members of the site influenced by the short stories, “A Serious Talk,” by Carver (1980) and “One of Us,” by Fante (1934).

Table 1
Sample Short Story Society Writing Exercise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Prompt:</th>
<th>Create a short work of fiction with two lines of prose and eight lines of dialogue.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guidelines:</td>
<td>• The writing should be centered on an unidentified conflict between two characters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The first line of prose establishes conflict without directly referencing the conflict. Tip: Action is recommended here!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Each character speaks four lines of dialogue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• The last line concludes the piece in a subtle, indirect manner.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the intimidation factor that can accompany writing (Ayotte, 2016), SSS piqued the interest for some writers who were more reluctant, as participants discussed what they read and then engaged in brief, low-stakes writing exercises. For students who might lack writing confidence, mentor texts can be a valuable resource to encourage and inspire them “as they intentionally try to grow as writers” (Hansen, 2009, p. 89). Additional benefits of SSS compared to a more traditional book club included shorter readings (therefore a reduced time commitment) and the ability to participate on a month-to-month basis. Hearing from different facilitators each month has also proven successful as participants are exposed to a greater variety of texts, while bringing in new writing community members. For instance, local classroom teachers and pre-service teachers not previously associated with NWP have been invited to facilitate, with some continuing to participate in the
monthly events. Finally, as an organization we have cultivated relationships with local venues, including an independent bookstore.

One SSS regular expressed her appreciation for the monthly gathering, explaining:

Short Story Society has become my favorite night of the month. When I was younger, I used to daydream about shared creative communities inside Greenwich Village coffee shops and Gertrude Stein's salon, and I feel like I've finally found that community. SSS is a warm, receptive space for literature lovers and artists to dive deep into the craft of writing.

She also shared some of her words from a recent writing exercise. For the exercise, participants selected a slip of paper with an object and one with an action and incorporated the two in their writing. After selecting “gumbo pot” and “grants wishes” this is what she penned:

When MawMaw died, she left nothing behind except the dilapidated double wide in Gueydan filled with a hoarder's lifetime of bric-a-brac. The morning I caught wind that she had passed, I left work and headed straight to the trailer. I had to get my hands on the Magnalite pot. That night, I lit the burner on the stove and started a roux in the bottom of the pot. As the flour and butter paste turned brown, I picked up a piece of paper and recited MawMaw's rhyme, "C'est quoi tu veux, without a doubt. What you put in, you always get out." I dropped the piece of paper in the pot and watched the words melt: "The $100 David owes me." The paper dissolved and as I stirred the onions and bell peppers in, my paddle touched a crinkly bill. A $1 bill bubbled to the surface, then another, then some coins. David must have been broke, but within half an hour $100 sat on the counter.

**Instant Poems**

Instant Poems is an event that was designed to provide an authentic outlet for youth writers while also celebrating writing within the larger community. For this event, members of a local high school poetry club joined our site’s fundraising efforts by writing “Instant Poems” in exchange for donations during a local festival. The young writers set up a booth, brought their materials (paper and pens and ribbon to tie up the poems like scrolls), and encouraged festival goers to commission a one-of-a-kind poem. Some patrons provided the writers with a specific topic they wanted their poem to be about, while others told the writers to craft a poem based on something of their choosing. One of the writers, reflecting on the event, explained:

Writing "instant poems" easily became one of my favorite events that Poetry Club ever participated in. I have always had a tendency to overthink and over-produce my writing before allowing anyone to read it. Writing the
"instant poems" taught me to let go a little—that I didn’t always need to have full control of people’s reactions to my work. Additionally, writing poetry for people in front of them really connected us (the writers) with our customers (the readers).

These events have also been themed to different holidays, including Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day. While Instant Poems initially enlisted high school-aged writers, for Mother’s Day a mother/daughter writing duo crafted poems in celebration of mom during a monthly art event. This was another opportunity to make writing public, which is one way to motivate youth writers (Chase & Fink, 2012).

**Partnership Events**

Another way our NWP site has helped to strengthen our local writing community is through partnership events with other organizations. In this way, we are bringing together members of NWP-Acadia and those involved in other community projects and events that foster literacy and encourage writing. While the specific partnerships established will vary from place to place, the following ideas are flexible enough that they can be modified and adapted for a variety of contexts and audiences.

**Reading Events**

As important as providing time and space to actually write is, having the opportunity to share one’s writing with an authentic audience is also powerful. Through establishing relationships with local businesses and other organizations dedicated to the written word, we have co-sponsored reading events, “Spring into Words” and “Fall into Words,” in which local writers are invited to share their work.

On a Saturday evening in a small downtown, friends of the National Writing Project of Acadiana and newcomers alike filled the seats of the local independent bookstore that had turned into a favorite gathering spot. As more chairs were added to the space and some attendees stood because of the larger-than-expected turnout, six local writers participated in a reading event in which they were able to share their work with others. Prior to the event, each writer had been featured on our social media pages, sharing a little about who they are and what they enjoy writing. After everyone was welcomed to the event, each reader had their biography read aloud and then had 10 minutes to share their writing. The audience enthusiastically listened as poems, essays, and stories were read aloud. Following the event, invited readers and event attendees expressed how much they enjoyed themselves and voiced their enthusiasm for similar events in the future.
This is quickly becoming a bi-annual event, with a reading in the spring and the fall. One writer who was featured in fall 2023 explained that she had recently lost her grandfather and sharing her writing was a way to “honor his memory through verse.” She continued, saying:  

The event not only allowed me to express my grief but also to celebrate his life in a public forum. In the warmth of a shared passion for the written word, I found comfort and strength. Fall into Words isn’t just about words on a page; it’s about the profound connections we forge through our shared love for language and the supportive community that lifts us when we need it most.

Through this gathering, local authors came together to share in their love of the written word and to communicate this to others interested in writing and reading. Having opportunities to take one’s writing public can be a source of encouragement, as well as a way to celebrate writing. One teacher who worked with our site for several years expressed a desire for his students’ writing to be recognized and honored the way athletes in school often are. Unfortunately, writing can be seen as a solitary endeavor and recognition may not come in such a visible way. By hosting a public reading event similar to the one described here, youth writers can share their talent and have their writing accomplishments celebrated.

Writing Competitions  
Continuing with the idea of celebrating writing, writing competitions can be an exciting way to encourage participation and engagement as part of a writing community. Currently, NWP-Acadiana co-sponsors and assists in facilitating two different area writing competitions, one for students and one for adults.

The Festival of Words is an annual two-day festival with the mission of “inspir[ing] creative expression and a higher level of literacy” and “contribut[ing] to the advancement of artists as well as the community” (The Festival of Words, n.d.). One component of the festival is a creative writing competition for area 3rd-12th grade students in which they are invited to write and submit an entry in the following categories: poetry, fiction, multimedia, and advertisement. While poetry and fiction have been part of the competition for many years, the other categories were added recently to encourage greater student involvement and recognize the many forms writing can take. The multimedia category includes scripted podcasts, short films or plays, comic books, and songs. For advertisements, students are invited to compose a script for a radio or television ad or create a visual advertisement. Students whose writing places in the competition are then invited to read their winning piece at the festival itself. Last year, more than 50 people, including student writers, attended the ceremony to hear the award-winning poetry of their children, students, and peers. At the ceremony, writers of winning pieces...
receive a medal and an anthology that consists of all the pieces that placed in the competition. Additionally, for the past several years, a small group of these students have been invited to appear on the morning news to talk about their writing, including discussing their writing process, inspiration, and even a few lines from their winning piece. Overall, this competition has become an exciting annual event with teachers encouraging their students to participate and students eagerly submitting writing year after year. Table 2 includes excerpts of past winning pieces from the writing competition.

Table 2
Festival of Words Youth Writing Competition: Student Writing Excerpts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elementary Poetry Division: 1st Place</th>
<th>High School Poetry Division: 1st Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>“Painting Words”</strong></td>
<td><strong>“Apathy”</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you ever wonder how our minds</td>
<td>my skull is inside out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sift through daily moments –</td>
<td>and my skin is translucent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Images, sounds, and words –</td>
<td>revealing the soft-shining nacre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And carefully choose the special ones</td>
<td>encasing my memory box</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be painted into our memories?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the mind choose?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years from now, will I remember tonight</td>
<td>the world is inside out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And how I balanced my baby sister on my hip</td>
<td>and bubbling forth with hymns of praise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As she flailed her chubby arms</td>
<td>for creatures pumped with styrofoam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the row of books in front of us?</td>
<td>so beautifully lifelike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>so fragile to human touch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NWP-A has also recently partnered with another local festival, Southern Screen, to co-sponsor a short fiction writing challenge. For this event, adult writers are invited to submit a piece of writing aligned to the year’s theme. This past year the theme was “A Story of Perseverance” with writers encouraged to interpret this broadly. After submissions are judged, the Top 10 Finalists are announced prior to the festival and invited to attend a session where the prize recipient is revealed, and their submission is read aloud. Additionally, the winning piece is published in a regional outlet and the writer receives a cash prize. For the first time last year, a writer’s panel was added to the session and featured local authors who shared their perspectives, experiences, and ideas on writing and participated in a Q & A with the audience. Through this writing challenge, participants are encouraged to showcase their talent in a fun, competitive manner. Then, at the festival they come
together to celebrate a shared passion, hear from experts in the field, and engage with a community of fellow writers.

While these competitions are specific to our NWP site’s region, there are endless opportunities for writers to participate in competitions that are designed to challenge, inspire, and celebrate. By conducting a quick Google search, writers can find local, regional, and national competitions aligned to their writing interests. Some might be specific to a particular genre or category or guided by a particular writing topic, theme, or prompt. Table 3 includes just a few examples of writing competitions worth exploring.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competition</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scholastic Art &amp; Writing Awards</td>
<td>Students in grades 7-12 can submit original writing in 10 different categories including flash fiction, journalism, and poetry. The program distributes regional and national awards.</td>
<td><a href="https://www.artandwriting.org/awards/">https://www.artandwriting.org/awards/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write the World</td>
<td>Write the World hosts monthly competitions featuring different topics and genres for writers ages 13-19. Winners are featured on the Write the World blog.</td>
<td><a href="https://writetheworld.org/#/competitions">https://writetheworld.org/#/competitions</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer’s Digest Annual Writing Competition</td>
<td>This annual writing competition is for writers aged 18+. Prizes vary, with some including cash awards and publication of the winning piece on WritersDigest.com. Some categories include memoirs/personal essays, humor, and children’s/young adult fiction.</td>
<td><a href="https://www.writersdigest.com/writers-digest-competitions/annual-writing-competition">https://www.writersdigest.com/writers-digest-competitions/annual-writing-competition</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Writing Retreat

As writers and teachers of writing, we know that finding time and space for writing can be a challenge. The dishes need to be done. The kids need help with their homework. We need to complete our own grading. And when you finally get a break, the couch might be calling your name more loudly than the pen. To have uninterrupted writing time is a luxury that some writers find difficult to make happen. Therefore, NWP-A’s leadership team considered ways to support the writing community it had worked hard to establish and nurture.

To this end, we partnered with the local university art museum to host a day-long writing retreat. This was a free event designed for writers to come together
for dedicated time and space to focus on writing, whether it be academic, creative, or personal. The event was advertised through social media and interested participants were asked to register ahead of time as space was limited. The 15 retreat participants included graduate students in Curriculum and Instruction and English (some just beginning their doctoral journey and others who expressed the need to work on their dissertation), current and retired educators at the PreK-12 and university levels, and others whose stated role was “writer.” Several indicated that they hoped the event would inspire and motivate them. Others said they hoped to network and connect with other writers and interact with a writing community.

As the event drew nearer, participants were notified of what to expect to get the most out of the day. First, they were encouraged to bring whatever materials they felt would best support them during the event. This included any drafts they were working on, resources to inspire them, and preferred writing materials. They were also told that journals would be provided and writing utensils would be available. Next, the schedule for the day was shared and included a guided opening writing exercise, two large writing blocks, and an opportunity to share at the end of the day. Additionally, participants were given an overview of the different spaces that would be available to them. This detailed the option to write within the museum galleries or visit different spaces designed to support various writing goals—the inspiration room, collaboration room, and quiet room. Table 4 includes overviews of each space that was shared with retreat attendees prior to the event.

Table 4
Writing Retreat Spaces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Space</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Art Museum Galleries</td>
<td>You’re invited to write amongst the art within the galleries of the museum!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiration Room</td>
<td>As the name suggests, this space is intended to inspire! This room will include writing games, directions for self-guided writing exercises, and various materials to encourage writing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration Room</td>
<td>When in this space, participants will have the option to collaborate with others—whether brainstorming, sharing their work, or providing feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quiet Room</td>
<td>If you simply need a space to sit and write without interruption, this is the room for you!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the day of the event, a member of the NWP-A leadership team facilitated the opening writing exercise, welcoming everyone to “write into the day.” Then, participants selected different spaces to begin writing in, informed by their goal(s) for the day’s retreat. At the end of the day, the writers eagerly shared poetry, pieces of larger creative and academic works, and the beginnings of stories they planned to continue developing. Following the event, many vocalized a desire for more
opportunities like this so they could continue privileging their writing by making time and space to work on it and have the chance to collaborate, share, and connect with other writers. One participant said:

Attending the writing retreat was exactly what I didn’t realize I needed. The museum space provided creativity and inspiration while the itinerary provided just enough structure to keep me focused. I appreciated the opportunity to share my writing and receive feedback in a safe and open-minded atmosphere among my peer writers.

For PreK-12 or university students, a similar version of this event could take the form of on-going writing workshops happening during class, as well as longer events such as the one described above.

**Recommendations**

While the events detailed in this article are focused on writers in one particular community/geographic region, these ideas can be recreated in other areas, including in classrooms and school settings. To help educators who are wanting to break out of teaching silos, and all writers in search of community, recommendations for creating and sustaining a writing community are included below.

**Ideas for Building a Writing Community**

The first step to building a writing community is finding those who will make up the community. Meeting people and forming connections is an invaluable part when first beginning to create a writing community. Attending local/community events (and school/academic events, if applicable) is a great place to start! Whether this is an independent bookstore, local coffee shop, or art museum, these are great opportunities to make connections and perhaps meet someone who, like you, is in search of a writing community. Through attending events and meeting new people, you may also find yourself being asked to take on new roles. If you are able to, say “yes” to these new opportunities as this is another way to create community as you are expanding your own network. For instance, I serve as a board member for the Festival of Words, which has only helped to strengthen our NWP site’s partnership with the organization.

Once you have started to gather a small group of writers, provide them with the time and space for writing. Whether this is a writing retreat or feedback group, planning events for writers to come together is the next step in nurturing the community you are creating. One member of our group shared how the events detailed above have benefitted her:

With the NWP-A I am not a lonely writer. Events such as the writing marathon have connected me with other writers in a fun, social
environment. At the Short Story Society, I have discovered works that led me to new and favorite authors and the thrill of great and diverse discussions of them. Events like Spring into Words have given me a venue to share my own work and the courage to do so.

Dahl’s (1992) text, *Teacher as Writer: Entering the Professional Conversation*, is a helpful resource that includes practical advice for how to form and participate in a writing group. For those seeking ideas to inspire writing, Goldberg’s (1986) *Writing Down the Bones* is full of ideas for writing exercises. Members of the NWP are encouraged to visit the Write Now Teacher Studio (https://studio.nwp.org), an online community that is ideal for connecting with other educators in conversation around writing and the teaching of writing. In this group, educators ask questions, share classroom resources, and birth new ideas to support student writers and improve their writing instruction. Regardless of how you structure these events, it is essential to provide opportunities for writers to come together and engage in the creative process with one another.

**Ideas for Sustaining a Writing Community**

For some, sitting down to write for big chunks of time (like at the writing marathon or writing retreat detailed previously) is effective because this allows them to get into a writing “flow.” For others, however, this approach may not be as successful, and perhaps not sustainable. Dickinson (2018) refers to large chunks of sporadic writing as “binge writing” and contrasts this approach to that of “drip writers” who “write more often, more regularly, and generally more calmly, with less emotional zeal per session” (para. 1).

Looking back, my attempt to be a pre-teen novelist was an example of binge writing. The mood struck me, and I wrote feverishly. But without continued commitment and perseverance, my writing waned. As a graduate student producing more writing on a regular basis than I ever had, this method was no longer going to serve me. Fortunately, I had a tight-knit group of friends from school who knew the value of a community. We began “coffee shopping” together as a way to encourage productivity, hold each other accountable, and have someone to bounce ideas off, celebrate writing successes, and commiserate over shared struggles. After jobs took us separate ways, my friends still went to coffee shops, but we were no longer able to gather like we once had. However, once the COVID-19 pandemic started, we began reconvening over Zoom for “virtual coffee shopping.” Since we could not be together and work, and could not work in local coffee shops due to the global pandemic, we once again turned to each other for support. While this was not a consistently implemented practice among our group, connecting virtually is a great way to sustain a writing community without restrictions to the physical environment. For example, a colleague of mine participated in a virtual writing
group to start the day (literally at 4:30 a.m.!) three mornings a week. When asked about how being part of the group impacted her writing, she explained that she was able to “actually write during a busy semester” and that “engaging with other writers about their writing styles and projects expanded my reading and thinking, and fostered opportunities for new collaborations.” Although she no longer convenes with her group at the same frequency, they still gather online each Monday to check in with one another, sharing their progress, struggles, and successes.

Whether a group gathers in-person or virtually, opportunities for consistent writing is a low-cost way to sustain a writing community. Currently, our NWP site does not meet for focused writing sessions with regularity, but it is my hope to implement this practice as we continue with a focus on community engagement. For those looking for additional resources, Silva’s (2018) *How to Write A Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing* offers advice and strategies to be a stronger, more consistent academic writer.

**Closing**

The impact of a writing community is invaluable. Whether it helps a reluctant writer feel increased writing confidence or motivation, connects people who share and receive writing feedback, or provides a space for writers to share their creativity with others, writing communities are powerful. For teachers of writing, creating a space that encourages student creativity and allows for vulnerability while nurturing them as writers and thinkers will have a lasting impact.

Recently, I spoke with a middle school teacher who has started a writing club at her school sparked by a student request. After promoting the club through school-wide announcements, a core group of six students has made this their writing community and gathers to write during lunch. The teacher/club sponsor explained their routine and her approach to leading this group of young writers:

> We soon settled into a routine—a five-minute writing prompt with an open invitation to read afterward. The six students have returned weekly. Not everyone shares their writing every week, but we all write, and we take turns providing the prompt. As the club sponsor, I participate, but I am not the teacher. I made an early decision that for this group to develop as a community, the needs and preferences of the students should shape what our group becomes. I offer ideas for activities, share resources, and pass along outside opportunities that may interest the students.

Through the organic creation of this group, this educator has provided a space for writers to gather, write, and share in ways that are personally meaningful. The students involved can connect with others who share their interests and celebrate
that passion with the writing community that has been created. I cannot help but wonder, if I had been part of a group like this, if I might have been more committed to the novel I started to write and quickly abandoned at 12 years old. While I will never know for sure, for this group of students, being part of a writing community is a great start to encourage whatever creative endeavors they choose.

This article detailed one NWP site’s various practices for encouraging writers to participate in a local writing community and provided ideas for how this can be adapted to different contexts, including in classrooms of all grades and ages. With the National Writing Project of Acadiana’s increased focus over the past several years to create and nurture a writing community that exists beyond the classroom, we have expanded our community of writers welcoming in people with varying interests, backgrounds, and experiences. In doing so, we have become a stronger organization, filled with passionate writers who come together to engage in something we all love. For me, growing my writing community has brought new friends and collaborators. It sustains me on days when I am tired, uninterested, or even discouraged with my own writing. It has helped me to be a better writer, as well as a better researcher and teacher. This community serves as a constant reminder of the impact of writing and the role that we can have as teachers of writing.

References


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