Feeding the Soul and Heeding the Echo: Building Education Leaders Inside and Out

The authors, who together have co-facilitated a unique professional development experience for the past two summers, share strategies for building effective leaders in cross-curricular writing instruction.

To escape his wife’s prying eyes, Jupiter, the god of gods, employs Echo, a beautiful and loquacious nymph, to distract Juno until he can sneak away from evidence of his philandering. To punish Echo for her part in the plot, Juno curses Echo with a restriction on her tongue: she may only repeat others’ words. When Echo later falls for Narcissus, a human with fade-resistant beauty prophesied to last so long as he never knows of it, her attempts to woo him with his own words fail dismally. He shuns her and she runs away to suffer her love in silence. Now weary from travel, Narcissus rests beside a clear pool of water, where he is drawn to his own enchanting reflection. Staring into his own eyes, he chooses to never lose sight of this vision. Ovid’s tale of Echo and Narcissus from his larger work *The Metamorphoses* provides the same fate for both as they pine for their heart’s desires: they starve to death (“Modern Translation”).

The story works as a cautionary tale for professional learning: excess outward focus starves the soul; excess inward focus starves the mind. Like Echo, people-pleasing educators focus on others’ needs over their own, even to the detriment of their soul-feeding need for quiet reflection and creative endeavors. Like Narcissus, on the other hand, pleasure-seeking educators prefer those soul-pleasing professional activities while avoiding challenging, mind-feeding professional development. If Narcissus and Echo join forces, a teacher might both feed the soul and heed the voice of others. National Writing Project’s (NWP) Summer Invitational Institute (SI) provides this opportunity.

Some say that without teachers, no other professions could exist (Dufour, qtd. in Thiers 16). But how are teachers taught? In a 2011 assessment of professional learning communities, former US secretary of education Arne Duncan writes, “Most teachers would welcome professional learning opportunities that help them stay current” (71). Unfortunately, though American schools spend $18 billion annually on professional development (PD), most educators report dissatisfaction with their on-the-job training (Sawchuk 6), largely because 90 percent of that money goes toward ineffective “sit and get” workshop-style models. Most satisfying and effective PD models exhibit five qualities: significant duration (up to 50 hours may be needed to master a new strategy), coaching support during implementation, active engagement with the new skills and strategies, expert modeling, and specific connection with classroom context (such as subject area or grade level) (“What Will It Take” 8).

For various reasons, much professional development lacks in those areas. But what if teachers took charge of their own professional development? James Gray, founding director of the National Writing Project (NWP), writes, “[A] skilled and knowledgeable demonstration by a classroom teacher would be believable to other teachers in a way that a performance by an outside consultant would never be” (Gray xii). Since its first SI in 2007, Ozarks Writing Project (OWP), an NWP site at Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri, has been helping southwest Missouri kindergarten through university instructors of all content areas find the knowledge and skills they need to grow.
as leaders of writing instruction. OWP provides the best PD available to educators at a fraction of typical PD price tags: teachers invest 16 eight-hour summer days and purchase a couple books. In return, educators gain immediately useful strategies and insights, advancement of leadership development and presentation skills, and renewed energy for teaching.

Moving Educators into Leadership through Inquiry

[He] said, “Is anyone here?”
Echo responded, “Here!”
Then he was stupefied. He threw glances all over...

OWP SI not only serves as satisfying and effective PD (“What Will It Take”) but also pursues the loftier goal of creating leaders in education as participants pursue in-depth inquiry. In Teacher-Researcher at Work, Marion S. MacLean and Marian M. Mohr argue that teachers move from the learner position to the leader position as they “assume the professional responsibility of documenting, analyzing, and writing about their work for other teachers” (xi). During SI, participants question, write about, and research classroom challenges. After uncovering potential strategies or solutions, they formally present their findings.

Identifying Potential Learning Leaders

SI supports learners willing to identify a personal professional problem, struggle toward a solution, and passionately embrace the necessary paradigm shift. Results of this process vary. Some begin SI seeking validation of current practices. Knowing play is a powerful learning tool, elementary teacher Michelle Slominsky hoped to champion play through research. Others seek answers to identified classroom problems. High school English teacher Melanie Cox craved time and strategies to implement conferencing with her student writers. Some teachers just come ready to embrace change: middle school science teacher Debbie Wallace knew writing could benefit her students’ learning.

Facilitators as Researching and Writing Leaders

When the PD facilitators have parallel experiences with participants, their empathy for the process and struggles grows. Consequently, facilitators lead, coach, and cajole stronger interaction and better products from the participants. As SI facilitators, Gretchen and Tanya draw on their own SI writing backgrounds while leading participants into personal writing journeys. For example, Tanya’s 2010 SI writing directly led to her composition of an award-winning short story and inspired an article published in the March 2015 English Journal. Likewise, Gretchen’s doctoral dissertation resulted from inquiry begun during her 2013 SI experience, and her poem composed while facilitating 2016 SI was published in the September 2017 English Journal. While facilitating 2017 SI, we produced this article...
in a small writing group, further modeling post-SI writing, researching, and learning.

**Building Individual Efficacy in Education Leaders**

Narcissus saw his face in the pond.

While he desired to allay his thirst, another thirst grew. ("Modern Translation")

OWP leaders know teachers of all grade levels and all content areas—not just in language arts classes—can use writing as tangible metacognition to produce meaningful, sustained student learning, but teachers’ insecurities in their own writing abilities serve as the biggest barrier.

**Identifying as “Real” Writers**

SI facilitators help participants dispel these negative beliefs. The first week’s reading and writing sessions remove reluctance and create writing identities. Writing Marathon, a popular first-week culminating activity, kicks off with a choral reading of “Why I Write” by Terry Tempest Williams and a group chant, “I am a writer!” With a list of potential routes for their marathon and a list of “rules” for the activity in hand, participants find inspiration in each location, spend ten minutes writing, and share their writing before moving to the next location. If asked what they’re doing during the marathon, participants respond, “I am a writer.”

**Identifying as Self-Driven Learners**

Throughout the SI, participants craft reflective, creative, professional, and personal pieces, as well as a research-based, one-hour teaching demonstration incorporating hands-on interaction from the learning audience. Besides a requirement for explicit research support for the strategies used in the demo, no other parameters are given. In *17,000 Classroom Visits Can’t Be Wrong*, authors and researchers John V. Antonetti and James R. Garver say individual efficacy begins “with an opportunity for Personal Response . . . to start solving the problem in his or her own way” (89) and is diminished when explicit models are provided to the learner (89).

Because all learners struggle with the learned desire to have everything spelled out, when SI participants ask questions with either/or scenarios—such as “Should I treat the other participants as students in my classroom or as colleagues?”—we respond “Yes, and . . .” (Jacobson and Ruddy 35), and self-accountability washes over them. Initial frustration eventually leads to autonomous learning that high school science teacher Colleen Freeman described in this way: “Wow. The light bulbs went on.”

**Learning Leadership Skills through Play**

“Here—let us meet!” he said.

And, responding with a sound that she never spoke more gladly,

“Let us meet!” Echo ricocheted. ("Modern Translation")

Adult learners have many of the same relationship needs as younger counterparts, which is why we strategically build community through game playing, encouraging participants to physically work together to solve problems, including how to “save the passengers on the raft” or work quickly to keep the “zombie from the chair” and save the village. Working and laughing together, we encourage finding the game in all learning while also helping participants learn to trust and rely on each other in their journey to discover answers. Participants then share writing with table partners, small writing groups, and lunch mates, building confidence to share personal thinking.

Community learning supports MacLean and Mohr’s rationale for mixing teachers in professional learning because “the mixture of teachers from
different schools . . . provides a broader kind of support and a new context for familiar questions” (22). SI participants discover patterns to the problems they want answered, including patterns recognized by expert thinkers in the field such as Kelly Gallagher and Peter Elbow. As they acknowledge universal classroom issues, participants also discover the difference they can make together. Secondary online English educator Julie Davis said, “When we feel connected, we accomplish more in education.”

Supporting Leadership through Community

She . . . hurled her arms around his hoped-for neck. (“Modern Translation”)

To outsiders, teaching is a seemingly social profession with a straightforward approach for reaching learning goals. But the art of teaching leads to “a wider range of thought and emotion than people outside the profession can imagine” (MacLean and Mohr xi). Largely separated from colleagues throughout the day, teachers often “feel separate and isolated with little control over the factors that make the work so demanding” (xi). SI’s first objective is to break through physical, mental, and emotional barriers to collaboration. SI must build trust before it can build a community of risk-takers willing to brave vulnerability in questioning and discomfort in not always knowing the right answer or how to get there.

Forming a Safe Learning Space

Charlotte Danielson argues all learners of all ages require a safe place to learn: “Just as effective teachers establish a classroom culture in which students feel both safe and challenged,” teacher learning leaders must likewise develop a “culture in which teachers feel safe to express themselves and take risks, but are also challenged to actively seek new and better approaches to their practice” (22).

On day one of SI, participants group themselves into small writing groups following a series of one-minute interviews. These trusted small writing groups meet 45 minutes per day for the remainder of SI, using protocols to share writing and receive responses and feedback. Protocols not only manage time but also provide safe parameters for discussion of ideas. As participants develop teaching demos, they are coached into deeper thinking through protocol. Clarifying (yes/no questions) and probing questions (pushing the teacher to justify their reasoning), along with a full discussion of ideas from non-presenters, fills both a structural need and a sense of decorum. Each demonstration concludes with a collective debrief protocol. Beyond initial awkwardness, protocols quickly provide a comforting and reliable form of communication to keep us on track and push us forward to think about our thinking rather than dwelling on past practice. Barbara S. Stengel calls this a “disruption of habit” leading to true education of the mind (203).

Finding Leadership Together

Disruption of current thought processes gives participants freedom to help improve everyone’s classroom, not just their own. Jenni Donohoo’s collective efficacy research supports embracing whole-community learning. Furthermore, Shana V. Hartman argues for opening our doors and seeing what other teachers are doing. Rather than ignoring school mandates and privately “doing ‘what we want’ in an effort to . . . teach in the ways [we] find meaningful” (17), SI develops collective efficacy that flings teachers’ doors open so echoes of their learning and that of their students can reverberate down the halls.

Antonetti and Garver suggest genuine interdependency among learners inspires new and better ideas among the group as a whole (90). Because SI participants have become both interdependent and independent in their learning, they share a wealth of information and a belief in many “right” ways to solve problems and to differentiate for our students.

Reflecting Our Way to Expertise

There was a lucid pool, gleaming with silver waves . . . (“Modern Translation”)

John Dewey said, “We do not learn from experience [but] from reflecting on our experience” (78). Reflection served as the unintended theme of SI 2017. Through our own reflection of SI 2016, we found a long-established SI activity “minutes of the day,” most likely created to bridge between the thinking
Leadership beyond SI

A great voice survives together with her bones.
The voice remains.
The bones became stones derived from her form.
(“Modern Translation”)

Something wonderful happens when this hodgepodge of rural and urban teachers become SI “fellows”: Hearts now set aflame for writing instruction, they not only use what they’ve learned in their own classrooms but also take the lead in advocating for cross-curricular writing at every grade level, throughout their schools and beyond. Some return to their classrooms with fiery passion that quickly spreads to classrooms throughout their districts. Some smolder a bit, making subtle changes in their own classrooms, suggesting the institute to colleagues, and slowly growing their confidence as teacher leaders. Regardless of the rate of impact for each teacher learner, OWP SI substantially transforms classrooms throughout southwest Missouri.

Paths of Leadership

In fall 2017, several fellows presented their teaching demonstrations at the Writing and Thinking Conference, an OWP professional learning opportunity developed for all K–12 teachers. All of the participants take their learning back to their school districts and work new thinking into their lesson planning. For example, high school English teacher Rebecca Proctor extended her “The Hero in Me” demonstration into a larger research unit, and middle school science teacher Debbie Wallace, who is eager to see how a more open-ended inquiry process will play out in her classroom, has already implemented daily writing at the start of each class period. SI facilitators urge fellows to persist in their work—whenever and wherever that may lead—including informal or formal publication of their findings. However, MacLean and Mohr warn, “The teacher is rare who is able, without the pressure of colleagues and deadlines, to write and publish for his or her own satisfaction” (84).
Ongoing Support

This is why the entire OWP community of leaders continues support of these budding teacher-researchers through Twitter, Facebook, and email, where they can learn about advanced institutes and other extended learning opportunities, invitations to participate in research studies, and OWP’s Writing and Thinking Conferences. After returning to their respective schools, fellows return for a “Renewal Day,” which reconnects them experientially to “gain deeper insights into student learning while trying new approaches” (Donohoo 67). An accountability system of regular meetings of writing/research groups or social media forums encourages continued work.

The Next Generation of Leaders

Because fellows crave SI’s collaborative and supportive atmosphere, they serve as OWP’s most effective recruiters. In return, OWP leaders communicate with administrators to support the fellows’ work, share OWP’s vision, and offer opportunities for professional development. OWP and NWP’s message is consistent: “Teachers who are well informed and effective in their practice can be successful teachers of other teachers as well as partners in educational research, development, and implementation. Collectively, teacher-leaders are our greatest resource for educational reform” (“About NWP”). Fellows showing leadership potential are recruited as future SI facilitators on a three-year rotation. Meanwhile, our ever-evolving, ever-growing OWP leadership meets several times a year to plan for the next SI and to look for ways to further promote student writing in area schools. This work has developed middle school and high school writing conferences and a partnership with the Rural Center for Writing in College, Career, and Community.

Conclusion

SI fellows embrace a new realization founded in readings, research, and exposure to each other’s ideas: great teachers can become even better (Danielson 20). NWP supports this paradigm shift to “provide frequent and ongoing opportunities for teachers to write and to examine theory, research, and practice together systematically” (“About NWP”). SI is a truly remarkable experience—one that will remain with me. It is an adventure of a peculiar kind that results in personal fulfillment, the formation of relationships with learning, writing, self, and fellows, and a realization that here is a true community focused on improving the world. I know the latter seems grandiose, and yet, here meets minds intent on something more than knowledge—more than education; here, there is a desire to open possibilities to students who hesitate to dream of such.

In SI, that power couple, Narcissus and Echo, finally marry within our participants, helping them project their own voices to project to their districts, their region, and beyond. Is it possible to both feed one’s soul and to also heed the echo of education voices that surround us?

You bet it is.

Works Cited

Antonetti, John V., and James R. Garver. 17,000 Classroom Visits Can’t Be Wrong. ASCD, 2015.
The NCTE Research Foundation Announces
2017 Teacher Research Grant Recipients

The NCTE Research Foundation has awarded teacher research grants to Cindy Ok, an English teacher at Manual Arts Senior High School, Los Angeles, California, “Found Translation: A Search for Multiple Selves through Dualist Creative Writing”; and Christopher Mazura, an English teacher at Guilderland High School, Guilderland Center, New York, “Rewriting as the Axis of Empowerment and Engagement: What Happens When Teachers of Writing Privilege Student Revision of Ideas: A Collaborative Study.” For more information on these projects, please visit http://www2.ncte.org/research/research-foundation/.

Tanya J. Hannaford and Gretchen Teague

Tanya J. Hannaford, a member of NCTE since 1995, teaches English courses at Mount Vernon High School in Mount Vernon, Missouri, and serves as a teacher consultant for the Ozarks Writing Project through Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. Email: hannafordtanya@mtvernon.k12.mo.us. Gretchen Teague, EdD, teaches theatre and English language arts, coordinates the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme at Central High School, and serves as a teacher consultant for the Ozarks Writing Project through Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. She has been a member of NCTE since 2016. Email: gretchen.teague@gmail.com.