

Take Time to Write!: A Teacher’s Story of Writing within a Community of Teacher Writers

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In the early 90s, a lengthy debate took place in the field of English education, sparked by Karen Jost’s article, “Why High-School Writing Teachers Should Not Write” (1990). In this piece, Jost argues ELA teachers take on too much responsibility for teaching writing and should not feel pressured to add more work to their already full list of responsibilities by writing in

their own time. While Jost’s article complained about time and the lack thereof, she also lamented how teachers are not rewarded for “serious writing” in the ways academics are rewarded. Jost struck a nerve. Her article sparked a deluge of responses from both in-practice teachers and scholars alike. Tim Gillespie, a practicing ELA teacher, joined the conversation in his response to

Jost, “Joining the Debate: *Shouldn’t Writing Teachers Write*” (1991). Gillespie acknowledged the burdens placed on ELA teachers; however, he shifted the conversation to the benefits of teachers also writing. Gillespie claimed teachers should write for three reasons: 1) to establish authority (p. 38); 2) to improve feedback on student writing (p. 39); and 3) to enhance professionalism (p. 40).

Following Gillespie’s piece, the debate died down; however, ELA teachers continue to feel pressure to write as, over the past decade, the teaching of writing has gained increased attention and focus in classrooms throughout the United States. The onset of the Common Core State Standards (NGO & CCSO, 2010) and policy documents, such as *Writing Next* (Graham & Perin, 2007b) and *The Neglected R* (The National Commission on Writing, 2003) have demanded writing take a more central role in the ELA classroom (Graham & Perin, 2007a, 2007b; National Commission, 2003; NGA & CCSO, 2010).

For many ELA teachers and teacher-leaders, the increased emphasis on the teaching of writing has been stressful and challenging, especially when many do not have their own sense of efficacy and practice as writers to draw from in their teaching (Applebee & Langer, 2013; Graham & Perin, 2007a). So,

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English Leadership Quarterly (ISSN 1943-3050) is published four times a year in August, October, February, and April for the Conference on English Leadership by the National Council

of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Rd., Urbana, Illinois 61801-1010.

Annual membership in NCTE is \$50 for individuals, and a subscription to *English Leadership Quarterly* is \$25 (membership is a prerequisite for individual subscriptions). Nonmembers and institutions may subscribe for \$75. Student and emeritus subscriptions are \$12.50 (plus \$25 for NCTE membership). Single copy: \$18.75 (member price, \$6.25). Remittances should be made payable to NCTE by check, money order, bank draft in United States currency, or credit card (call NCTE toll-free at 877-369-6283).

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NCTE’s website: www.ncte.org

Editor: Oona Abrams. NCTE Editing and Production: Pamela A. Crews. Designer: Pat Mayer.

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the question remains: How can we, as ELA teachers with too little time and too many pressures, find the support we need to more effectively teach writing? And is it worthwhile to add writing to our lists of to-dos when those lists are already too long? This article addresses our question through a qualitative case study of one ELA teacher's participation in a two-week [National Writing Project](#) (NWP)–sponsored Advanced Summer Institute on the teaching of argument writing and highlights how an investment of time within a teachers-as-writers community (Hicks, Whitney, Frederickson, & Zuidema, 2016) has the potential to transform writing instruction (Whitney, 2008). Taking time out of the summer to participate in the NWP Summer Institute became “the most applicable and important professional development [Abbey has] been a part of.” Abbey’s story suggests we find ways to take part in professional writing communities to improve our teaching of writing, share our expertise, and write for our personal and professional selves.

Abbey

Abbey is a tenth- and twelfth-grade high school ELA teacher. When she participated in the NWP Advanced Summer Institute on the teaching of argument writing, she had just finished her eighth year of teaching at a comprehensive public high school in an urban center in the southwest; she was 32 years old. In her eight years as an ELA teacher, she has taught ninth- through twelfth-grade regular and honors courses as well as Advanced Placement English. Abbey is also a teacher-leader. She is a teacher mentor within her department, an AP/IB level lead, a school representative for her district literacy cadre, and the Annual Yearly Progress personal project coordinator for her school. Abbey is also committed to extending her education and completed her Masters in English Education at the local university the year of this study. She is a gregarious

Many [Summer Institute] participants ended up sending [their] pieces out to local publication venues such as local papers, blogs, and newsletters.

woman with a quick wit and a razor sharp mind. Although she responds with humor and sarcasm in most scenarios, she takes her job as a teacher seriously and clearly loves her chosen career.

The NWP Summer Institute

The NWP Summer Institute is a professional development program offered by 184 local NWP sites at universities and colleges across the country (“About NWP,” 2017). NWP Summer Institutes are offered in different formats (in person and online) for different amounts of time (two weeks, one month, over a year) and with different points of focus. Still, all share the core value of the NWP of “teachers teaching teachers” and focus on research-based practices for teaching writing, teacher inquiry, and professional and personal writing.

In the summer of 2016, Abbey participated in an Advanced Invitational Summer Institute on College-Ready Writing as a part of her MA in English Education. The Institute Abbey attended is offered for two weeks every June, for a total of 30 hours, to MA students in the English Education degree program and to local K–university teachers throughout the greater urban area. In 2016, the Institute was funded by a grant sponsored by the NWP (“College-Ready Writers Program”). The charge of this grant was to offer a Summer Institute as professional development for secondary teachers from high-needs schools to study, practice, and prepare to teach college-

ready writing, with a specific focus on argument writing. As the leadership team for the Summer Institute, we [Katie and Jessica] designed the two weeks to provide teachers with opportunities to share their expertise in teaching argument writing, read current research on teaching writing, prepare four mini units on argument writing for their upcoming instructional year, and write arguments for public and professional audiences. During the Institute, twenty-two secondary teachers from high-needs schools throughout the greater urban area wrote together, presented demonstration lessons (Gray, 2000), and created curricula for their own classrooms on argument writing. Participants wrote every day and created podcasts based on arguments they wanted to make about their teaching practices, contexts, challenges or successes, and op-ed pieces about issues in their classrooms, schools, and education. Many participants ended up sending these pieces out to local and national publication venues such as local papers, blogs, and newsletters.

Writing in a Community

Within the NWP Summer Institute writing community, Abbey was invited to write for various purposes and audiences and to share her work with her peers. These were all experiences she had forgotten about as a teacher in her own classroom. The writing Abbey produced during the Summer Institute varied depending on the prompt, the genres, and perhaps even where her mind was at the time of the writing. She shared personal stories, such as an extended narrative of a vivid and terrifying night at home. She wrote several arguments about her frustrations as an urban teacher working in a challenging school setting in a state with little support for education. She shared the daunting job of educating America’s future. Throughout the two weeks, she also created images and captions to illustrate and articulate her thinking and feelings about teaching.

For her two larger projects Abbey produced a podcast about the negative ways education is portrayed in media and how she challenges this deficit view. For her op-ed, she took a more personal stance by responding to an article she had recently read about *Jersey Shore*.

Benefits of Writing

As Abbey participated in a community of ELA teachers as writers, she grew in three key ways. First, she felt rewarded and inspired as a writer and teacher. Next, she expanded her definition of what counts as “real” or important writing, especially argument writing. And finally, she was reminded of how enjoyable writing and the teaching of writing can be.

Reward and Inspiration

As Abbey shared her writing within the Summer Institute community of writers, she was met with praise from peers. Abbey’s peers enjoyed her writing and valued her humorous outlook about teaching and life. This praise and support for her writing and teaching made Abbey think of ways to incorporate more peer feedback and support for writing in her classroom. For example, in a reflection Abbey wrote after completing the Summer Institute and returning to teach, she shared, “[In the Summer Institute], we read our podcasts aloud and then other teachers wrote a letter in response and presented their feedback. I had to sit there and be totally quiet and then ask questions. That was a totally amazing process; I now use it all the time [in my classroom]. And now, months later in my own classroom, my students have responded to it too.”

What Counts as Real Writing

Along with support and encouragement for her writing and teaching, participation in the Summer Institute allowed Abbey to expand her definition of what counts as “real” or “important” writing. Before the

Summer Institute, Abbey recognized the academic writing she produced for her master’s program as “real” writing because she viewed it as scholarly. Her classroom curriculum reflected this thinking that “real writing is academic writing”; the majority of the writing she assigned in her classroom before the Summer Institute was typically academic in nature and strayed little from preparing students for testing. Once Abbey was writing in the Institute herself, however, her definition of “real” writing began to expand.

Abbey’s many moves as a writer and shifts in perspective throughout the two weeks transformed her definition of what counts as “real” writing . . .

Throughout the Summer Institute, Abbey was exposed to new approaches to teaching argument writing that moved beyond the traditional literary analysis, research paper, or test-prep essay. Looking back six months after participating in the Summer Institute, Abbey realized she had “had a very static and traditional way of approaching” writing in her classroom prior to the Summer Institute. Abbey’s many moves as a writer and shifts in perspective throughout the two weeks transformed her definition of what counts as “real” writing and also expanded her understanding of what it means to teach argument writing.

For example, during the Summer Institute, she participated in a writing workshop on using infographics. She had never done this before in her own writing or teaching and realized it was “a great way to teach argument that I’ve never considered. . . . it does a simultaneous

job of teaching kids [about forming arguments] and giving them exposure to interacting with [technology].” Writing various arguments in different genres during the Summer Institute in her own writing expanded Abbey’s ideas about her teaching and helped her think about real ways people make claims in the world. After participating in the Summer Institute, Abbey revised her syllabus to be an infographic.

Abbey was invited, along with all of the Summer Institute participants, to create a podcast. Abbey argued in her podcast that media has unfairly misrepresented teachers by blaming them for the failures of our country. This assignment stood out to Abbey: “I love podcasts. I listen to them all the time, but I never would have thought, ‘Hey, I should have kids do this,’ or ‘I’m going to make one on my own,’ and ‘What’s that going to look like?’” The Summer Institute exposed Abbey to genres she had not considered before and taught her to “think of argument more broadly, and to have students analyze the arguments posed in places and things I wouldn’t have previously considered. I am reevaluating what I thought argument is and what it looks like in the classroom.”

Finding Enjoyment in Writing

The Summer Institute reminded Abbey of the ways learning, practicing, and teaching writing can be enjoyable. She also realized that important and worthwhile writing does not always have to feel serious or detached. She noted the the Institute “made me realize how enriching it can be to focus intensely on something that stands out to students personally without input from guided analysis or questioning.” She now shares one assignment she did during the Summer Institute, focusing intensely on one line and responding through drawing, as an example for students.

Abbey had previously focused her curriculum so closely on test preparation and writing for other

standardized assessments that she had lost sight of what writing can and should do and how enjoyable it is to create. Her students are now engaging in writing not just in preparation for tests, but in preparation for their long lives as writers. Abbey's experiences writing in the NWP community revitalized her teaching practice and focused it back on her students.

Time Well Spent

After the final week of the Institute, Abbey looked ahead to her new year of teaching and explained how her experience would change her teaching practice dramatically. After the Institute, Abbey saw herself more as a teacher of writing who "loved giving students the opportunity to flex their writing muscles." Now, in her classroom, she pushes her students to write more broadly and asks them to do "quite a bit of writing and research that calls for students to present their arguments and findings using technology that transcends the traditional paper, Prezi, or PowerPoint." She reflects on her time in the Summer Institute as a "wonderful way to establish connections, to do the work we ask of our students, and to write from a personal place with other adults and English lovers." ●

Join the conversation!
Jessica: @Jessie_Early

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Opportunities for teachers to write in communities

1. National Writing Project offers Summer Institutes in all 50 states <https://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/doc/findasite/home.csp>
2. National Endowment for the Humanities offers summer workshops for educators <https://www.neh.gov/divisions/education/summer-programs>
3. Online writing forums such as Teachers Write 2017! <http://www.katemessner.com/teachers-write/>

April 2018 Call for Manuscripts: Social and Emotional Learning

"Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. For a growing number of schools and districts, SEL has become a coordinating framework for how educators, families, and communities partner to promote students' social, emotional, and academic learning." —[Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#)

This issue considers how SEL is ingrained in the ELA landscape. How do you respond to emerging student needs with SEL? What curricular decisions are the result of embedding SEL? What types of texts are successful with an SEL focus? What supports are in place for teachers implementing SEL? What types of professional development are you able to leverage to support SEL efforts? How are your efforts coordinated in the school community? How do you know when SEL is working? **Deadline: January 15, 2018**