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Using Embedded Institutes as Professional Development to Create a Culture of Writing Excellence

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USING EMBEDDED INSTITUTES AS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO CREATE A CULTURE OF WRITING EXCELLENCE

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The following thesis addresses the problem of creating a culture of writing excellence at a large, urban school. I will show how the Embedded Institute model helped our school to reconsider our professional development model and to create writing leaders across the content areas. The thesis will make the argument for something larger than test scores through qualitative feedback from teacher participants.

Introduction

Over the course of two school years, 24 Lincoln North Star teachers participated in Nebraska Writing Project (NeWP) Embedded Institutes focused on increasing and/or improving teacher and student writing. The success of our work was because of our staff's willingness to push themselves to develop as writers and our district's flexibility in allowing site-based professional development. LNS was fortunate to have had a history of open-minded leadership who embraced the NeWP philosophy that the best teachers of writing are writers themselves. The Embedded Institute models clearly helped our school move toward our goal of a culture of excellence for writing, a goal that exceeded a narrow focus on test scores. In general, the collaborative Embedded Institutes are transportable models for professional development in any school.

Our Problem: The Culture of Testing

My 11 years of teaching English and serving as the English Department Chair at North Star were turbulent years in education. From 2003-2014 education in general had become very data-driven. NCLB, AYP, Race to the Top, accountability, PLCs, data—measurable test scores became the yard stick by which students, teachers, and schools were judged. Government programs "relied on testing and accountability as its lever of change" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 260). In Lincoln Public Schools, Graduation Demonstration Exams (GDEs) in reading and writing had been implemented. The Nebraska Department of Education created State Assessments (NeSAs) in writing, reading, and mathematics (and now also in science). Our curriculum specialists created "District Common Assessments" for sophomores (and now freshmen).

With so much focus on a "big assessment", and in terms of the GDEs, high stakes assessments (an LPS student cannot graduate without passing the GDEs), it was easy for our teaching focus to shift to "how can I get my students prepared for the test?" As Ravitch (2010) argued, "…the competition among schools to get higher scores…is sure to cause teachers to spend more time preparing students for state tests, not on thoughtful writing, critical reading, scientific experiments, or historical study" (p. 228). With so much emphasis on testing, it was easy for our School Improvement Committee to want us to focus our PLC conversations on improving test scores and pass rates. It was as if our world was all about breaking down the next writing test: are we working on preparing for a timed, 40-minute personal narrative? Are we drilling in expository writing? And, even worse, perhaps, was that at the state level, it seemed that really, students needed to master the standard five-paragraph essay in order to score well. 9th grade became practice GDE after practice GDE with the hope being students could pass the test at the end of their freshman year. 10th grade was often continued practice GDE (if students still had not passed) as well as District Common Assessments. And 11th grade was the dreaded NeSA exams—which were hard to get students to take seriously because although they were high stakes for the school in terms of publicity and reputation, they were not high stakes for the students. Absolutely nothing happened to a student who wrote an excellent paper nor to a student who wrote nothing. Their scores impacted the school's overall ranking only. So, teachers felt it necessary to give big pep-talks about the importance of taking a writing test seriously and to giving serious instructional time to preparing for the test. All the while we knew that our school "will not improve if we value only what tests measure" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 226). We knew the writing tests should not be taking over

instruction and they certainly weren't inspiring our teaching or leading to educational excellence.

What we wanted to address and/or change in regard to writing at North Star:

- Many of our students were struggling with the GDEs and were spending their high school career in remedial classes; thus, they often grew tired and frustrated with writing.
- Some of our best writers could easily pass the GDEs, but found the NeSA stifling because they weren't rewarded for "breaking the mold" of the traditional 5-paragraph essay.
- Writing felt like the sole responsibility of the English Department. Although many of us knew teachers in other departments assigned writing—typically AP teachers—we didn't really know what kind or quality of writing students were doing anywhere besides in our own classroom.
- The exams students cared about—GDEs—they cared only about 'passing.' Once a student passed the exam, she thought "I'm done learning how to write. I can graduate." The test created a sort of culture of mediocrity for many students—doing just enough to pass and be done.
- We needed a writing program that taught students a wide variety of writing skills, that taught them to write to a variety of requirements and expectations—one that was more authentic.
- We wanted to encourage students to be more flexible and better able to adapt to a variety of writing situations.

- If we could create a stronger writing culture, a stronger *thinking* culture would follow. As one teacher bluntly stated, "Because students cannot write without thinking, it would follow that we can improve their thinking skills as well, something that is sorely missing in this day and age."

In a nutshell, the problem was the burden of testing, a concentrattion on quantitative data as superior to qualitative or professional instinct, on the development of more tests, which, therefore, led to a focus on passing (or scoring "proficient"). The problem was a test-prep teaching mentality and for students, a general satisfaction with writing *competence* (as opposed to writing *excellence*).

Our History

When North Star opened its doors in August 2003 we were the newest of the six public high schools in the city of Lincoln, population of just over 260,000. The first ten years of our existence came with a lot of growth and change. We were a 9-12 building, but we had room to also house our own small middle school for a couple years to ease overcrowding in our feeder schools. When North Star High School finally got to occupy its own whole building, we were already on our way to overcrowding. Open areas of the building originally designed for collaborative work, presentations, seminar-style discussions were quickly walled-in and turned into traditional classrooms. Portables were brought in and parked at the back of the building.

By 2012, North Star was a student body of over 1800. Of those, 54% reported as Free or Reduced Lunch; 39% of our students reported as ethnic minority; 6% were English Language Learners; 14% special education, and 14% identified as gifted (School Snapshot Brochures, 2012). Our demographics qualified us as a "high needs school"

because many of our students were “at risk of educational failure or otherwise in need of special assistance and support” (U.S. Department of Education).

While North Star worked to build traditions and a positive culture of excellence in education, it was often a struggle. We had students who had ‘graduated’ from ELL support courses but who were very much still learning English. We had a great number of students who *needed* ELL but who were opting out of support courses so they could attempt to graduate before they aged out of the system. Those students could typically speak functional English, but still struggled greatly to write in it. While we prided ourselves for building one of the strongest Advanced Placement programs in the district—offering more AP courses in more content areas and with the highest percentage of student diversity in enrollment—and for our collaborative work with local colleges to offer dual-credit college courses, our school’s writing test scores still consistently ranked in the bottom half of the city’s high schools. But it was more than our ELL students who needed improved writing instruction.

Cindy Lange-Kubick reported in the Lincoln Journal Star (December 4, 2014) on Lincoln’s north/south divide, with O Street being the “line of demarcation”. In order to further understand the LNS demographics, we can look at the demographics of north Lincoln:

- 7.3% unemployment north of O, compared with 4.2 south.
- $42,000 median income north, $64, 800 south (and a 22% poverty rate compared with 8%).
- 30% of adults with college degrees, compared with 42%.

These statistics help to demonstrate the blue-collar/while-collar divide and illustrate the uphill path in life and in school many of our LNS students had to take. Many were first-generation college students for their families. Many of our students had jobs and were working more than 30 hours per week. Many of our students were hungry and took advantage of the free food market our local Food Bank brought in to our school once each week. We understood that when students were worrying about their basic needs, it was difficult to concern oneself with academic goals and test scores.

Our Mission

After 10 years at North Star it was clear there was a need—a *mission*—to not only increase the effectiveness of our writing instruction in English classes, but to increase the capacity for writing across the content areas. The case had been made by NWP (2006) that "students need to write more across all content areas and that schools need to expand their writing curricula to involve students in a range of writing tasks" (p. 6). We needed to not train our students to take tests, but educate our students as writers. The high-stakes tests were focused on single writing tasks—the GDE tested students on narrative and expository writing. The NeSA-Writing exam was a persuasive essay. And it was the sole responsibility of the English teachers to prepare students for those specific writing situations. No other department had ever seen or studied the writing prompts the tests were requiring students to write to. They were too focused on preparing students for tests or district assessments in their own subject areas. We needed all teachers to "use writing to help students reflect and think critically about content" (NWP, 2006, p. 54).

Reconsidering Professional Development

Our administration was very interested when I approached them about collaborating with the Nebraska Writing Project to look at a professional development option for improving writing in our school. As NWP itself described in its 2008 Research Brief:

> Professional Development for Educators stands at the core of the National Writing Project's (NWP) work to improve the teaching of writing in our nation's schools. The NWP network provides programs for teachers of writing at all grade levels, primary through university, and in all subjects. A central feature of the NWP model is that the design of professional development programs is tailored to local needs, reform priorities, and school conditions.

A NWP model made sense for re-shaping our writing instruction. We were fortunate that our principal herself was a former student of the NeWP Summer Institute and so she understood the power of the Writing Project model.

We also knew from NCTE what quality Professional Development should look like. In describing the core *Principles of Professional Development*, NCTE (2009) laid out the following position statement:

> 1. Professional development of teachers/faculty is a central factor leading to student success.
> 2. Professional development treats teachers/faculty as the professionals they are.
> 3. Professional development supports teachers/faculty at all levels of expertise; its value is confirmed by external validation.
> 4. Professional development relies on a rich mix of resources including a

theoretical and philosophical base; a research base; and illustrations of good practices.

5. Professional development can take many different forms and employs various modes of engagement.

6. The best models of professional development—best in the sense of enhancing first, teacher practice leading to second, student learning—are characterized by sustained activities, by engagement with administrators, and by community-based learning.

Research had continually shown that the National Writing Project "is one of the most effective training programs for practicing teachers" (Urquhart & McIver, 2005, p. 69), that the NWP model of professional development "honors what teachers know and do while giving them authentic opportunities to improve their practice" (Urquhart & McIver, 2005, p.69). It would be the authenticity of the writing, honoring the professionalism of the teachers, and allowing us to dig in to the research and readings that were relevant and important to our situation that would truly tailor the program to our needs. It would be the teachers themselves providing "illustrations of good practices." It would be, as Palmisano (2013) described, "collaborative inquiry plac[ing] educators in the role of actively constructing professional knowledge through treating their classrooms and schools as sites for investigation" (p. 23). It would be focused first on teacher practice to lead to enhanced student learning. So, we at North Star High School, in Lincoln, NE, set out to develop a project based on the NWP model and the NCTE expectations.

Envisioning our school as a center of writing excellence, we needed to be willing to re-think several current approaches to school reform. As had taken over many conversations, PLC groups, data, test scores, "measurable" information was what we had been encouraged to focus our time and attention on. Ravitch (2010) reminded us, "When we define what matters in education only by what we can measure, we are in serious trouble" (p. 167) because "not everything that matters can be quantified" (p. 226). Yes, our test scores *matter*, "but they are an indicator, not the definition of a good education" (p. 90).

As well, as Applebee and Langer (2013) explained, teaching to a high-stakes test—like the Lincoln Public Schools' Writing Graduation Exam or the Nebraska State Assessment in Writing—ran counter to our larger goals. That what we really needed to be doing was "to help students learn to consider the context, purpose, and audience for their writing and how these affect the choices they make about genre, organization, and language" (p. 48). A test wasn't something students or teachers should *worry* about; if their writing experiences were broadened, they could adapt their skills to different situations. By focusing too narrowly on tests, students weren't going to improve their skills. Koretz argued "whatever they learn is likely to be aligned with that test and is not likely to generalize well to other tests of the same subject or to performance in real life" (as cited in Ravitch, 2010, p. 160). We were interested in engaging in real educational reform that would move us beyond a focus on testing to conversations around *writing* and ideally/eventually writing excellence.

Using the Embedded Institute model with an emphasis on teaching inquiry and writing was an excellent way to focus on the development of writers—both teacher and

student, to develop professional communities, and to positively influence the culture of our school. We understood, as NWP (2006) pointed out, "that if writing teachers are to learn effectively from their colleagues, they need to participate in an in-depth program, one that allows them to try out in their classrooms what they learn from one another and to share what they find out" (p. 66). The Embedded Institute would focus first on the experience of the teacher—on teacher outcomes. Again, as Ravitch (2010) pointed out, teachers who relied on extrinsic motivation (like test scores) "may actually hinder improvement, because people will work to make the target yet will lose sight of their goals as professionals." The E.I. would encourage "idealism, autonomy, and a sense of purpose" (p. 259) and would provide opportunities for cross-grade-level and cross-curricular conversations about writing.

The Embedded Institute Model

Our first year (2012) Embedded Institute was quite typical of the traditional Summer Institutes that had run at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (Appendix A). The focus was devoted to improving writing instruction and the practices were based on the basic tenets of the Nebraska Writing Project:

- The best teachers of writing are writers themselves.
- Teachers provide the best instruction for other teachers.
- Anyone, no matter their ability level, can improve their writing in a supportive context with other practicing writers.
- True school reform comes through democratic partnerships across grade levels.
- Teachers, students, and communities benefit when teachers form networks with other teachers and draw on collective expertise.

I, in my dual roles as English Department Chair and NeWP Advisory Board Member, served as the on-site liaison for the Institute, and two veteran NeWP teachers facilitated the Institute and provided written feedback to participants' writing as well as organizing and conducting all meetings. The E.I. was to be a supportive writing and teaching workshop. All participants would meet as a large group each month from October-May, following our initial start-up meeting in September. Each meeting would include the following:

- Open with 10 minutes of free writing.
- A presentation highlighting a best practice lesson either used or to be used in the classroom or other area of instruction. This presentation should be based on information gained from the requirement for professional reading.
- Written reflection on each of the presentations.
- A read-around of a favorite personal writing (led by one writing group each month).
- Overnight written response by other participants and facilitators (Appendix B).
- Instruction on matters such as author's notes, responding to writing or professional materials, rubrics, assessment, and managing writing loads.

All participants were also expected to meet weekly in small writing groups to share their personal and professional writing. Each teacher would engage in professional inquiry and demonstration of applied research concerning writing—also known as Teaching Demonstrations, to round out the basic structure and expectation of the Institute (Appendix C).

One of the most important elements of the Institute was the small writing group

meeting. The facilitators and I put together the writing groups; because of our numbers we created five groups of four teachers each. One goal was to ensure that each writing group included teachers from across the grade-levels and across the curriculum. We wanted to encourage new relationships, new conversations, new collaborations, and new support systems. Writing groups were expected to meet each week to read and talk about their writing. Faithful attendance was expected as working in a group depended upon the presence and input of all members. Participants were to alternately bring personal/creative writing or professional response writing to their meeting (Appendix D). Each writer would share an author's note (Appendix E) and read aloud their piece to the group. After reading aloud, group members would verbally respond to the piece as directed in the author's note (Appendix F).

The E.I. final group meeting would end with a large-group read-around and with each participant submitting a portfolio of writing and reflection (Appendix G). In essence, we took a one-month intensive Summer Institute and brought it to our building, extending it to a full school year, but keeping the core activities in tact:

- Immerse participants in their own writing;
- Invite participants to share their best teaching practices for writing;
- Engage participants in inquiry and research into aspects of writing.

The Embedded Institute, like the Nebraska Writing Project Summer Institute, focused first on teacher as practicing writer (being able to state with confidence, "I am a writer") that led to student learning through writing because "being a writer as well as teacher adds depth to your mandated curriculum…and informs your yearlong curricular planning" (Painter, 2006, p. xv). Even the E.I. participants understood that ultimately,

"the results of our work here should increase the writing ability of the students of North Star High School."

Beyond Year One

We were quite happy with the result of the work of our one-year E.I.—we had found optimism, hope, trust, a renewed energy for our own writing and for the kinds of work we could do with our students. As Palmisano (2013) had also found with collaborative inquiry, our results demonstrated "increased teacher agency in their practice and ownership of their professional learning" (p. 25). But we still wanted another year to provide "opportunities for teachers to work together to understand the full spectrum of writing development across grades and across subject areas" (NeWP position statement). Several E.I. participants had noted the lack of "content area" teachers (of 19 participants who completed the Institute, 13 were from the English Department), and our administrators understood that if student literacy really was to increase, the students had to be writing outside the English classroom. It was clear that "[a]s the role of writing in learning across the disciplines becomes more apparent, every teacher has a responsibility to incorporate writing into his or her classroom" (NWP, 2006, p. 60). Urquhart (2005) had also cited Greenleaf and her colleagues (2001) who found, "the best teachers of specific discipline-based literacy practices are those who themselves have mastered these practices." Urquhart then pointed out, "And the best way to master these practices is to practice them yourselves" (p.69-70). Besides, if "writing is the most visible expression not only of what…students know but also of how well they have learned it" (NWP, 2006, p.11) then many more of us should be utilizing it as a strategy and skill. Thus, writing leaders in content-areas had to be uncovered or and nurtured.

We wrote a grant to fund a second year, interdisciplinary Embedded Institute, that would build on the success of the first, guiding participating teachers to define the key forms and features of effective writing in their disciplines, recognizing that writing is both itself a core *humanities* subject as well as a means of sharing knowledge, thinking, and insight in all disciplines. It was through writing that students "could develop higher-order thinking skills: analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and interpreting. The very difficulty of writing is its virtue" (NWP, 2006, p. 22-23) because it pushes us to *think*. And higher-order thinking skills are valued in every subject area, in every class.

While the first year was 'staffed' by teacher volunteers from any department (and in the end, from English, Special Education, Family and Consumer Science, and Math), we wanted to help guarantee our professional development opportunity to a larger audience, so year two our focus was much more clearly on writing across the curriculum. As had been pointed out by NWP (2006): "…schools not only need to have students write more; they must also give students a rich and diverse array of writing experiences" (p.14). With the help of our administrators, we hand-selected teachers from 10 different content-areas to work on improving writing within their courses. Our teachers came again from English, FCS, Math, and Special Education, and also from Social Studies, Science, Music, Art, ELL (English Language Learners), and Business. Of the 10 teachers, four had been participants the first year and were eager to dig deeper into their own writing work and research on student writing.

While we did continue to follow the in-service model of the National Writing Project that seeks to build on direct connections between teachers, through the principles that "teachers are the best teachers of other teachers" and "teachers are the experts in

education," and on the established record of personal connections between teachers, administrators, and community members being the key to real educational improvement, our focus was more intensely devoted to immersing participating teacher-leaders in best models for successful writing across the disciplines. We explained that for the sake of our students, it was imperative that all teachers view themselves as teachers of writing and that we create opportunities for real writing in all classes. One primary goal of our work with the content-area writing was to make writing a necessary and authentic part of our students' daily lives—recognizing how writing helped us to connect with one another, to connect with course content/instruction, and to connect with the expectations of written communication in the world around them (Appendix H).

We spent our first few meetings studying three core texts together: *Because Writing Matters* (National Writing Project), *Content Area Writing* (Harvey Daniels, Steven Zemelman, and Nancy Steineke), and *Writing Instruction that Works: Proven Methods for Middle and High School* (Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer). We also brought in teachers from other school districts to speak on how they use writing in the content areas, specifically, writing in Physical Education and writing in Music. Our readings, discussion, and reflection then finally led to the creation of Action Plans.

In the Action Plan, each teacher/participant was asked to do the following:

- Identify your classroom goal for writing implementation
- Specify the professional reading you will need to undertake or have already undertaken
- Detail your plan of action [based on the grant, your research ideas, and your classroom needs and goals]

- Describe what you expect to show as artifacts/evidence

Teachers were active researchers within their own classrooms and would spend the rest of the school year implementing their Action Plan. At our monthly meetings, we did continue the practice of Teacher Presentations, but this year they were focused more on teachers presenting the new work they were implementing—or planning to implement—in their class(es) (Appendix I). It provided an opportunity to talk through needs, goals, strengths, and weaknesses and to fine-tune their work for future use. At the end of the school year participants presented their findings and shared their expertise at an after-school poster session. Their audience included the entire LNS staff, district curriculum specialists, associate superintendents, and teachers from across the district. They then also presented at the NeWP spring gathering to teachers from across the state.

As explained by NWP in *Because Writing Matters (*2006*)*, "The path to change in the classroom core lies within and through teachers' professional communities; learning communities which generate knowledge, craft new norms of practice, and sustain participants in their efforts to reflect, examine, experiment, and change" (p. 57). The Embedded Institutes at North Star encouraged a "new" approach to professional communities and thus encouraged reflection and change in the teachers. They were collaborative in nature, "engag[ing] educators in self-directed and participatory learning, moving beyond collective passive learning to learning with and from colleagues through action and reflection" (Palmisano, 2013, p.23)

Judging the Effectiveness: Beyond Test Scores

But how would we know if our two years of E.I. professional development had been a good investment? Would it be through increased pass rates on the GDEs?

Increased scores on the NeSA-W? As Professor Robert Brooke, the Director of the Nebraska Writing Project, had explained to our administrators, the tests were seeking to measure a basic writing competency, but we were seeking more than competence—we were seeking excellence (personal communication, May 2012). And really, we were seeking a cultural shift in our school. As Fels and Wells (2011) pointed out, "Although schools may have lists of mandated 'literacy' checks—exams, standards, benchmarks, and objectives—these only hint at the big picture, and in some ways distort it" (p. 9).

We agreed with Ravitch (2010) that "schools cannot be improved by blind worship of data" (p. 228) and that if we simply used quantitative data, high stakes test scores as our measure, then the E.I.s would probably not seem immediately useful. NWP studies (2006) showed that "effective professional development requires time and resources" (p. 57) and Ravitch (2010) also found that "school improvements—if they are real—occur incrementally, as a result of sustained effort over years" (p. 137). While our test scores did show improvement (on the NeSA-W, an increase from 55% proficiency to 65% as reported by the State of Nebraska), our goals were explicitly beyond the scores. We judged the effectiveness of our models, our move toward excellence, by the reflection and feedback of the participants because it was through personal and professional growth that teachers found themselves willing to take new risks in their classrooms, potentially willing to forge new relationships—through writing—with their colleagues and students, and developing their leadership skills as they led others to discover the power of quality writing instruction/use in the classroom.

Learning From Each Other

One success of the E.I. was in knowing others in the building also were experimenting, reflecting, and working toward change. Such knowledge gave others confidence as they knew they had allies as they worked to continually improve their teaching and their students' learning. "Participating in communities like the Writing Project helps [teachers] to define themselves and the very notion of leadership differently. Specifically, they seek to support each others' learning, development, and action" (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010, p. 31). Participants felt emboldened and empowered by their E.I. experience and their work with colleagues and were therefore, willing to be open with others about their writing, their pedagogy and practices.

In *Teacher Research for Better Schools* (2004) Mohr et al. suggested that "when teachers work together to study teaching and learning, they break out of the isolation of the classroom and begin to teach each other" (p. 15-16). It was the practice of each E.I. to pull teachers together, to pull them "out of the isolation of the classroom," even to pull them out of the isolation of their department or grade-level work. As mentioned earlier, North Star was (and is) a large school, and thus, we had a large staff (over 140 teachers and support staff). Therefore, it was difficult to truly communicate and collaborate. Teachers taught in the isolation of their department, and even then, were often so focused on PLC work and working with "like" teachers that we rarely got to know what was going on outside of our little professional bubble.

At the end of the year Jill, a young English teacher, reflected:

> It has been fun and inspiring to watch members of other fields write and implement writing in their classes. From FCS to math, I'm seeing how writing can be implemented across the curriculum, and how the reflective nature of

> writing about subject matter helps students self-assess and better understand materials. I really enjoyed hearing from teachers outside of the English field because it reminded me why we do what we do as teachers. It's not about being separatist within our own fields, but about helping students connect with ideas and each other.

The E.I. process opened doors of communication and collaboration, forging relationships across the curriculum. Jill concluded by stating, "We often become single-minded when addressing our students and creating/designing our lessons. Mining our relationships with colleagues outside our field can…help us to have a more holistic view of what is going on in our building."

Several participants noted that the collaboration was one of the biggest and most important parts of our work. Marty reflected that, "Networking with other teachers has been one of the biggest bonuses of this work." Marian realized, "I am very inspired by the talents of my co-workers and I believe deeper relationships have come from our small-group weekly connections." Bryan talked about the "culture of creativity" that was created by working together. Such camaraderie, the opportunity to learn from talented professionals, a shared focus on improving our teaching techniques added to our growth as learners, writers, and teachers.

Another teacher participant pointed out that,

> Supporting teachers of other departments or even collaborating from year to year is certainly in the best interest of our student body. There have been more teachers to work with as we spent exploratory professional time with others; these connections will foster teacher relationships that evolve from the spark of an idea

to essential concept, from an interest to a lesson plan.

Just as Palmisano (2013) had explained when pointing out the effectiveness of collaborative inquiry, "individual and collective action become more intentional, coherent, and evidence based" (p. 25).

We found (not surprisingly) that collaborative relationships among colleagues could inspire others—students and teachers—to join them on our journey toward excellence. "Collectively, teacher-leaders are our greatest resource for educational reform. 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" (NeWP position statement).

Participation in an E.I. also helped participants to, as Jocelyn, the art teacher explained, "develop a deeper understanding of the school's curricular culture and connect with other educators to develop a deeper understanding of the use of writing in the classroom…I was excited to participate to get to know my colleagues from other departments and to be involved in building a curriculum structure that incorporated writing."

Perhaps just as importantly, it has been found (as cited in *Phi Delta Kappan*, 2014) that "teachers who engage in collaborative learning have higher job satisfaction and confidence in their abilities" (p. 6). In teachers' final reflections a consistent theme was feeling an increased confidence in their own writing work: having a greater trust in themselves, their strategies, their pedagogy, and their practices. Teachers felt "validated," "excited," "encouraged," "rejuvenated" and "striving for the ideal," ready to continue to

take their work, as Sue put it, "to the North Star ocean and the metaphorical tide [that] will help us all surge onto the bigger beach of learning!"

The Process

We also learned that change is a process both for teachers and for students. Bailey, a math teacher and two-year participant in the E.I. partnership described how instructional change happened in her classroom:

> The first time I included writing in my classroom was exit tickets and not necessarily about math, but about how students are reflecting upon their learning. Then I expanded to paragraphs of reflections about their assessments in which they explained to me how they studied, whether their performance surprised them, what they are going to do in the future, and making goals for the future.

Although Bailey's first ventures into writing with her students were small, she eventually expanded the writing opportunities, saw improvements in her students' work, and grew her confidence through her own writing and her work in her classes; Bailey understood that "if writing is to be viewed as a vital tool for learning and thinking, the school community may need to talk together about its purposes beyond the obvious one of communication" (NWP, 2006, p. 51). Bailey found writing a wonderfully useful tool to yes, help students communicate what they did/did not understand, but also a tool to learn, to reflect, and to connect.

Over the course of a single semester Camelle, an FCS teacher, reflected, "In the past I have really not included much, if any writing in most of my instruction and/or assessment. Because of this Institute, that is changing." Eventually she realized she had "to just *try* to add writing to my classes. It [went] remarkably well…students [wrote]

some wonderful reflections on their learning and learned more about themselves through the process." Others commented, "I [have] had some of the most valuable feedback that I've seen from students in my entire teaching career. I'm looking forward to expanding and improving these ideas in the future."

One Must Write

As Kristen Painter (2006) stated, "To be a more effective and understanding teacher of writing, one must write" (p. xiv). In writing, however, we are vulnerable. Jill reflected upon the vulnerability that the E.I. required of us, and the excellence it expected of us as we worked to be better writers, teachers, and leaders:

> As teachers, we have a job that requires us to be ever-growing, fluid within our position and our field. If we become stagnant in our practice, we fail our students. Because of this need to continue 'becoming' as teachers, we must be open to constructive criticism and feedback, and in order to gain this feedback we have to produce and share work. NWP encouraged this production and sharing. We wrote, we designed lessons, we discussed scholarly work, and we gave each other feedback and constructive criticism that promoted growth. We were vulnerable with each other, knowing that excellence would be the end game.

The importance of the professional development opportunity was clear and teachers who were part of the E.I. experience realized not only the significance of their own growth, but the great possibility for incredible growth for their colleagues, for the whole building. The vulnerability Jill mentioned was significant as it highlighted the risk participants had to be willing to take with one another, a personal and professional risk. But the risk proved worth taking, and once that happened, teachers found themselves willing to also

take risks with their students, being willing to share their own writing, their own processes, their own setbacks and successes. One participant noted, "I [plan] to share more of my work with students because they always clamor to hear what I've written, and I think it's important that they see me as a writer too." They were much more sympathetic to the struggles of their own students and could explain with authority how a writing task—no matter how small—was relevant and meaningful to their work. Cale commented, "Whenever students talk about the challenges of writing, I feel like I've got a lot more to say in response…I feel like I can talk to students about their writing and their difficulties while showing them what I've done to overcome my difficulties."

As participants became better writers, they also became better teachers. In her final reflection, Shari admitted, "…after twenty-five years of teaching I was falling into a rut. My work through the Institute gave me many fresh ways to inspire writing in my students as well as in myself." As Linda Rief believed, "by experiencing your teaching from the perspective of a student, you discover what is and isn't good enough for your class of students" (as cited in Painter, 2006, p.xv). Through experimenting with their own writing and reflecting on current research on teaching writing, our participants strived for excellence in their writing and teaching. Cindy reflected:

> I have become a student of writing and have had to face some of the same obstacles as my own students…Placing myself in the position of a student has helped me to better understand the process of writing and to improve my teaching skills.

And Sara said that because of her work with the E.I. she, "took off the teacher 'red hat' and looked for more of the praise worthy lines [in student writing] than the 'you need to correct' lines. I felt better about it and my students thrived."

When talking about school reform Ravitch (2010) asked, "Can teachers successfully educate children to think for themselves if teachers are not treated as professionals who think for themselves?" (p. 67), and the Writing Project philosophy could easily be turned to ask, 'Can teachers successfully educate children to write for themselves if teachers themselves are not writers?' The NWP philosophy of professional development and the E.I. model helped lead teachers to see themselves as writers. One teacher reflected at the end of the first year, "I have learned to say the words, 'I am a writer' and mean it. I *am* a writer." That was the big first step in our cultural change. All teachers can be writers and teachers of writing. Bailey stated, "I believe I am a completely different teacher and writer. I am more confident in my own ability to write and my ability to share the importance of writing in education."

The Power of Influence

Part of the success of the EI model was the confidence participants gained and influence they now had. As already mentioned, those who participated were influenced by one another, but they then also influenced others: colleagues in their department, in the building, across the district, state, or country. Teachers, by their willingness to participate in an E.I. were already engaging in several core leadership principles: "Working 'alongside' teachers and leading collaboratively; Learning and reflecting on practice as a teacher and leader, and opening the classroom door and going public with teaching" (Lieberman and Friedrich, 2010, p. 95).

But the increased confidence the teachers felt led them to also advocate what's right for students and take a stand (Lieberman and Friedrich, 2010, p. 95). Marty, our building Reading Facilitator, explained, "My experiences have given me the ability to speak knowledgably about integrated writing as a possible part of the Continuous Improvement Plan. I'm a firm believer in the process [of embedded writing]." Bailey continued her reflection by saying:

> I believe through the Embedded Institute I was able to collaborate and feel more comfortable bringing up different ways to include writing in the math classroom with my fellow math teachers. And after two years, I am very vocal about the importance of writing as a 21st century skill and as a method of communication between student and teacher.

In only two years Bailey's E.I. work led her to present twice at the Nebraska Association of Teachers of Mathematics Conference, to University of Nebraska pre-service teacher classes, for LPS staff development sessions (in collaboration with our E.I. art teacher), and even earn a teaching award for innovative strategies (including writing) in the math classroom.

Jocelyn explained how she now advocates and works to be an example of the excellence writing can bring to a student's understanding of content:

> I know that in my department we are all focusing more and more on authentic writing tasks that are of use to our students and us as we assess student learning…I feel like [we] have 'bought in' to writing and it has become something the kids expect in our classes (although they still whine about it). I do not feel so much like an agitator as I feel like an activator; this is probably

> because I feel like I have the support from my department and from other teachers who participated in the E.I. around the building.

It was a powerful realization that our E.I. "graduates" had the power to *activate* others, to encourage the positive shift toward excellence. Just as powerful was that people—students and teachers—were listening. The excellent reputation of NeWP/NWP and the hard work the participants had put in to their own writing, their own professional inquiry, and active research, gave them authority to talk about writing. Teachers could provide their own examples to support the research of such people as Harvey Daniels et al. (2007), that "Writing helps students get more actively engaged in subject matter, understand information and concepts more deeply, make connections and raise questions more fluently, remember ideas longer, and apply learning in new situations" (p. 5). In her final reflection, Shari wrote, "I openly share my success…A couple weeks ago I found myself sharing ideas with other teachers of juniors across the district. I wouldn't have had this confidence previously. Much of our conversation involved [teaching] ideas from the Institute."

Jocelyn went on to explain her new leadership roles/scope of influence, outside of her department:

> The E.I. has led me to present [staff development] to my content area colleagues (art teachers from other LPS schools). I was also asked to serve as curriculum facilitator at the NATA (Nebraska Art Teacher's Association) conference because of my experience with the E.I. and the connection it has to the new state standards which include "Responding" and "Connecting" as two of the overarching themes of an art education. Additionally I facilitated a Writing Instruction session at the

Sheldon Museum of Art's Artful Teaching evening.

Beyond becoming leaders in our building, working to improve our students' writing skills, their college and career readiness, E.I. participants became leaders in the larger educational community. Teachers were asked to name the ways they had become "expert leaders," ways they had expanded their leadership roles, since their work with the Embedded Institute(s):

- Jess and Lori (English): Selected to work on writing the district Composition and Advanced Composition curriculum.
- Jill and Cyndy (English): Twice presented their E.I. best practices presentation for district staff development sessions.
- Sara (English): Applied for and was accepted for the Amherst Writers and Artists (AWA) training in Chicago. She is now an AWA certified leader for writing-for-healing groups and was able to work with NeWP and local veterans this past fall, using writing for healing.
- Mike (English): Has spoken nationally and internationally about use of critical feedback, standards-based grading, and use of rubrics. He and Marty (Reading) presented a webinar on standards-based grading. Mike also has excerpts in two of Jane Pollock's books (*Improving Student Learning One Teacher at a Time; Improving Student Learning One Principal at a Time*) and in one of Ken O'Connor's books (*A Repair Kit for Grading: 15 fixes for grading. 2nd ed)*.
- Emily (ELL): Dr. Stavem (Associate Superintendent for Instruction) asked for a complete overhaul of the Lincoln Public Schools' ELL program. Emily was asked to be on the Secondary Programming Committee. The committee met for a

semester to make recommendations to the superintendents, the school board, and others about curriculum for secondary (middle and high schools). They are also making suggestions about personnel changes.

- Shannon (Business): The E.I. led to being selected by the Nebraska Department of Education as a representative for the Business Ed. curriculum department on the creation of cross-curricular writing activities. (The ELA department came up with a list of 100 writing strategies, and Business Ed. wrote specifics about how they could be implemented in different business courses.) She also encourages the use of those through the district and as she serves on district curriculum teams.

A focus on improved teacher practice (of writing) has led to an improved focus on student learning through writing in our building and our district (and even in our greater community).

Conclusion

The National Writing Project showed in their 2008 Research Brief, "In nine independent studies, in every measured attribute of writing, the improvement of students whose teachers participated in NWP professional development exceeded that of students whose teachers were not participants." So whether we focus on writing improvement for students or whether we focus on the improvements for teachers and their increased agency and ownership, the Embedded Institute as professional development is a model to follow, and one that can be implemented in any school.

The research has continually shown that the National Writing Project "is one of the most effective training programs for practicing teachers." That the NWP model of

professional development "honors what teachers know and do while giving them authentic opportunities to improve their practice" (Urquhart & McIver, 2005, p. 69). When we write, we are part of a community of writers. When we write, we remember what it is like to be a student of writing. When we write, we improve our writing instruction.

Writing was the essential element of the E.I. experience because through the act of writing, our thinking and our teaching improved. Overall, the goal of helping to meet the needs of our "high needs" students, of creating a writing-rich culture and therefore increasing student literacy, remained. I do believe the Embedded Institutes were a definable moment in North Star's history and in the careers of the participants, but we were rich with possibility.

We saw possibility in our students that tests were simply not tapping into and we saw possibility in ourselves, for continued growth, learning, and leadership. Teachers as writers, teachers envisioning the ways their students could be writers, is the kind of work that can transform a school. Much more than conversations that revolve primarily around quantitative 'data.'

To push back against any professional development model that was simply responding to the "urgency of meeting mandates…designed to…close the achievement gap (Palmisano, 2013, p. 12), focusing on test scores as the measure of quality in a school, we sought to empower our teachers as "decision makers and change agents who build their own 'reforms' that best fit students" at North Star (Palmisano, 2013, p. xiii). We were given the freedom to focus on our needs, to engage in writing as writers, to dive into professional inquiry with our colleagues, to collaborate and reflect, to, as Palmisano

(2013) said, “take responsibility for shared practice and student learning” (p. xiii). Real change to our teaching practice happened. Teachers then transferred their learning to encourage greater changes at the building, district, and state level. When educators take ownership of the professional development and believe in the work they are doing, when they are supported by their building and district administration, there is a culture shift where we see educators connecting, supporting, and reflecting with one another and from that, there is an increase in student achievement.

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2012-13 Embedded Writing Institute

Philosophy: This institute focuses on and is devoted to the improvement of writing instruction. The essential assumptions of the Embedded Writing Institute are based on the tenets of the Nebraska Writing Project:

- The best teachers of writing are writers themselves.
- Teachers provide the best instruction for other teachers.
- Anyone, no matter their ability level, can improve their writing in a supportive context with other practicing writers.
- True school reform comes through democratic partnerships across grade levels.
- Teachers, students and communities benefit when teachers form networks with other teachers and draw on collective expertise.

Structure: The Embedded Writing Institute is a supportive writing and teaching workshop with a prescribed structure. Meetings for the group will be organized from October to April during the school year; additionally, weekly small group meetings for sharing writing will be held throughout the school year. Professional development and demonstration of applied research concerning writing round out the Institute.

Small Groups Meetings: Each week teachers will meet in small groups to read and talk about our writing. These sessions are the most important aspect of the Institute. Faithful attendance is expected as working in a group depends on the input of all members.

Participants alternatively bring personal creative writing or professional response writing to the meeting as indicated on our calendar. These pieces will be read aloud to the group and be accompanied by an author's note*. You may bring substantial revisions to the groups in lieu of new pieces every week. After reading the piece aloud, participants will verbally respond to the piece as directed in the author's note.

We will discuss the ways of responding to writing as well as the etiquette and structure of small groups as the Institute progresses, but the general notion is that these are positive, supportive groups of writers trying to help each other do the best work possible. These are not grammar or editing circles unless a participant specifically asks for such a response.
*Information on author's notes and an example of an author's note is included in your materials

Large Group Meetings will include:

- Presentation to the group by participants highlighting a best practice lesson plan either used, or to be used in the future, in the classroom or other area of instruction/administration and which is based on information gained from the required professional reading.
- Reflection by all participants based on each of the presentations
- Read-around of favorite personal writing and over-night responses by the other participants
- Instruction on matters such as authors' notes, responding to writing or professional materials, rubrics, assessment, and managing writing loads
- Guest speakers

- Great food!

Writing

In the Institute we will use three types of writing: personal, reflective and responsive. Each aspect is detailed below.

Personal writing:
This is an opportunity for us to do the writing we never seem to have time for. During the Institute we encourage you to write about what most interests you. These personal, creative writing pieces will be shared in the weekly small group meetings and will alternate with professional development writing. Suggested styles for your creative pieces might be:

personal narratives	short stories	case studies
poems	articles for periodicals	novel chapters
autobiographical	position papers	family histories
reflections	book or article reviews	compelling essays
dialogues	play scripts	children's books
research reports	funding proposals	screenplays
monologues	multi-genre collages	memoirs
travel pieces	movie reviews	persuasive letters
journals	effective editorials	?

Professional development writing *(and reading)*
A significant portion of the work of the Institute is immersion in reading and research related to writing. From the suggested materials provided by the school, or those you self-select from another source, you will explore an article or book that interests you and provide a reflective piece on that reading.

These reflective responses will be shared in the weekly small group meetings alternating with personal, creative writing. The writing should include but is not limited to the following three standards:

- Identification of professional material, including text title, author and publication information
- Recognition and notation of ideas, philosophies, models or practices you find interesting.
- How you intend to apply this information and your thoughts regarding these points

*An example of a reflective response piece is included in your materials

Set reading goals for yourself so that you will *cover a total of at least three professional books* during the course of the Institute. It is important that you plan your time so that you are able to read and reflect *in writing* upon a professional idea for every other small group session.

Response (reflection) writing
Response writing takes place in several ways.
An internal procedure called "free writing" involves reflecting on a given topic or simply writing and reflecting upon those elements in life which are currently pressing on us or that we wish to celebrate.
The external procedure will be responding to our peers' writing through written response or "take home" responses. This takes the form of one-to-one responding and the exchanging of pieces after the large group meeting.

At each large-group meeting, some participants will bring a "best practice" lesson plan to be shared with the group. At each large-group meeting, you'll all bring **personal writing** to be shared. At those meetings you will need two copies of your writing and an AUTHOR'S NOTE (an explanation is included in your materials) because you will exchange one with another Institute participant. Participants will take these pieces home and provide overnight written reflective response to the author. Please bring your feedback to school within the next two days to give to the writer.

Evaluation (reflection writing)

A last form of response and reflection will be a mid-point assessment and a final LETTER OF LEARNING. These pieces allow you to write about the process of your learning, writing, group work and your professional development. The process provides a way for you and the facilitators to assess both your progress and the effectiveness of the Institute.

Outreach

How, when and where will you share your learning with your colleagues? If it is true, and we firmly believe that it is, that the best teachers (of writing) of other teachers are teachers (and writers) themselves, thoughtfully consider your responsibility to share your knowledge with others. Give some careful thought about how you can become part of a cadre of teachers dedicated to helping other teachers in your field.

Practical Points**

KEEP ALL YOUR WRITING! During the Institute you will gather together the writing you've produced for the Institute and provide a reflective letter (Your Letters of Learning) explaining what this work shows about your growth as a writer and a teacher of writing. You may separate your writing in any manner you see fit, but the best portfolios show the process as well as the product.

Guidelines for Writing Overnight Responses

At each of our monthly meetings, we all will have the opportunity to respond to someone else's writing. This response will not be verbal, but will be written.

Process:

- Write (type) a response (approximately one page) to the piece.
- Make two copies of your response.
- Within two or three days after being given the piece, hand one copy of the response to the author of the piece.
- Within two or three days after being given the piece, hand one copy of the response to Melanie.

Hints for responding:

- Be sure to read the author's note and address the concerns of the writer.
- Let the author know the emotional and intellectual response that you gained by reading their piece.
- Mention any specific words or phrases that you found enhanced the meaning of the piece for you.
- Claim any suggestions as only your opinion, making sure that the author wants and is ready for suggestions.
- Respect the author's privacy. They have shared with the group, but may not want to share with someone else.

Feedback

Good feedback shapes the writing into something better. In any small writing group, you must give excellent feedback so the writer has something to work with. Nothing is worse as a writer than when you ask for feedback and everyone just says, "It's great!" or "I wouldn't change a thing!"

In order to make sure everyone is giving constructive feedback, we ask you to use one of the following formats below.

"Three Stars and a Wish" response format.
To use this kind of response, you do the following:

1.) You point out three specific things you see in the writing that you really liked or that impressed you. These might be an idea, a particular word choice, or a "thinking move" the writer used, or anything else you really liked. These three specific things are the "three stars" of the response format.

2.) You then mention one thing about the writing that you wonder about or wish you understood better. This might be an application of the idea or something you didn't understand or an organizational choice that surprised you. This one thing is the "wish" in the response format.

OR

"ANW Response" = Appreciate, Notice, Wonder response format

This kind of response asks you as responder to articulate three different kinds of experiences you have with the text. The writer can then choose what to make of that articulation.

Appreciate → "I appreciated this about your text…"

This first response move asks you to point out to the writer some of the ways the piece connected with you. Often, we appreciate something in the **content** of the piece ("I appreciate the emphasis on family that you provide"), or the **purpose behind it** ("I appreciate the grief and honor you show your grandmother"), or the **tone** ("I appreciate the sense of excitement and laughter you generate"), although the range of what to appreciate is vast based on who you are and how you read.

Notice → "I noticed this about your text…"

The second response move asks you to point out some of the things you saw going on in the piece, to identify some of the craft choices you saw. "I notice that your mother always sounds angry…" "I notice how many red things you have in the piece from red shoelaces to lipstick to the red flowers on the wallpaper…"
This response move asks you to articulate some of the work you are doing as a reader to see how this text does what it does.

Wonder → "I wondered this about your text…"

The third response move asks you to point out some of the things you were curious about as you made sense of the piece. These might include **content** items ("I wonder why you changed your feelings about your sister"), or **craft choices** ("I wonder about the point of view, how for most of the piece I was in your head at age 8 except for the first paragraph, where I see you as your age now"), or **options** you considered as you read ("I wonder whether the rhymed lines help you say what you mean most here. I've heard Ted Kooser talk about how poetry and personal essays often explore the same topics, and found myself curious what more you'd say about your memory of fishing with your father if you'd chosen an essay").

This response move **asks you to be curious** about the piece and the writer's work going on through it. It's your chance to share some of the wondering your bring as a reader to the work of making sense of the text.

Presentations

Best Practice / Lesson Plan -- takes two forms; oral and written report

Vital to the Institute is the time we spend discussing what works in our classrooms. The aim of the Institute is to experience, explore, discuss and strategize how we can improve writing and the implementation of writing in our classrooms throughout all disciplines. With this aim in mind, we ask you to develop and use an actual classroom lesson plan that utilizes writing in a unique way—a lesson you have **not** attempted before. We also ask that this lesson plan emerges from the professional reading, writing and exploring you have discovered in this Institute. Following your idea of how to construct a well-written lesson plan, the model you share should include, but is not limited to, the following:

- What did you do?
- Why did you do it? →Cite research that supports your reasoning.
- How was it received in the classroom?
- Who benefited from this activity?
- How would you change the activity?

Include personal reflections over your experience, questions for future applications and ideas for applying this lesson in other classes. Please note that your lesson plan should be detailed enough that any participant could recreate the activity when they pull it out of their files next year.

Thus, you should expect to spend about 45-ish minutes presenting and 15-ish minutes engaging in Q&A with your audience (the rest of us).

*** At the end of the Institute, we will compile an anthology of these best practices so you will have a copy at your disposal of all these wonderful ideas -- and the theory behind them -- to use in your classes.*

Guidelines for small group formation and calendar

- You need to decide meeting times and name your writing group
- Notify facilitators by October 20
- Each person in the group should check out a book at the first meeting so that you have time to review for your first professional response paper. (You'll share with your small group sometime during the week of Oct 29.)
- Remember to give the facilitators a copy of either personal writing or professional response each week.

The following are the weeks that you should be meeting with your small group, and for which we will expect to see your writing. If these times don't work for you, make sure that your small group has met a minimum of 15 times throughout the year (don't be so excited that you schedule them all in the first few weeks), and that we have 15 pieces of writing from each of you by the end of the year. We realize that many of you are going to be busier during certain times of the year, so you will have to make adjustments, but the following schedule is our suggestion for writing and small group meetings:

Calendar of meetings and weeks to write:

October 16th 8-noon large group meeting
Week of Oct 22: personal writing
Week of Oct 29: professional writing

November 5th 3:30-7:30 large group meeting
Week of Nov 12: personal writing
Week of Nov 19: no required meeting (Thanksgiving!)
Week of Nov 26: professional writing

December 4th 3:30-7:30
Week of Dec 10: personal writing
Week of Dec 17: no required meeting (Finals week!)

Week of Jan 7: professional writing
Week of Jan 14: personal writing
January 21: Time TBA
Week of Jan 28: professional writing

February 5th 2:15-6:15
Week of Feb 11: personal writing
Week of Feb 18: professional writing
Week of Feb 25: personal writing

Week of March 4: professional writing
March 11th 8-noon
Week of March 18: personal writing
Week of March 25: professional writing

Week of April 1: personal writing
Week of April 8: professional writing
Week of April 15: personal writing
April 23rd: 1:00-5:00

A copy of the writing that you take to small group each week also needs to be sent to the facilitators.

"Everyone who knows how to read has it in their power to magnify themselves, to multiply the ways in which they exist, to make their lives full, significant, interesting." --Aldous Huxley

Author's Notes are the primary way to focus on the specific TASK you, as writer, want accomplished during your small group time. Using Author's Notes well means knowing ahead of time where you are with a piece, and how the response will help you. Often we will know this ahead of time, but just as often we won't. Consequently, in writing author's notes our advice is to provide as much information to responders as you can, and then to experiment with what response to ask for. Over a period of time, you can figure out what most often helps you.

Author's Notes, Option 1

An Author's Note gives responders the crucial context they need to know how to respond. It should include three sorts of information.

1) A statement of where the text is in the process of development (first draft, ninth draft, based on an idea I got last night, an attempt to fix the second half by switching it to dialogue, etc.).

2) Your own writer's assessment of the piece (I like this about it because . . . I am worried about this about it because . . .).

3) Any general sort of response you want, any specific questions you want answered. ("Today I think I need Support and Encouragement because I feel fragile about this piece." "Please tell me how you imagine the narrator of this scene, because I'm trying to create a specific kind of voice here and I need to know what kind of voice you get." "I'm worried about how I describe my grandmother here, so I want you to tell me how you imagine her from what I give you.").

Author's Notes, Option 2

Remember, this is your own creation and it is very helpful to tell the responder exactly what you want in response. You might mention the following things in your note:

- **Background information on the piece**
  Such things as:
  Where did you get the idea?
  What kind of research did you have to do for this piece?
  Why did you decide to choose this topic?
  Who inspired you to write this?
  How did you first approach the writing of this piece?

- **How you feel about the piece in its current state.**
  Do you feel that this piece is barely started?
  Do you feel that it needs a lot of polish?
  Are you happy with the beginning, ending?
  Are you satisfied with the piece as it stands now?

- **Questions or concerns you have about the piece.**

List any questions that you might have about content, characters, theme, clarity, expressions, language usage, organization, appeal to the reader, etc.

- **Requests for a particular kind of response about the piece.**
  Do you want just positive responses?
  Do you want a critical evaluation?
  Do you want the responder to describe what they think you are trying to say, and how you made them feel? Do you want help with the technical aspect of the writing?

- **Your reflections on the writing process or strategy that you are using.**
  How are you feeling about the piece emotionally?
  Do you feel stuck in any certain place?
  What parts of the piece do you think are the best, most satisfying to you as author?
  Where will you be going from here with the piece?

SMALL-GROUP SHARING; RATIONALE & PROTOCOL

GOALS

- To have each writer find a level of comfort and support in the process of sharing and developing his or her writing.
- To learn and use the process of providing high quality feedback which can be the model for use in your classroom.
- To provide an eager audience for sharing information found while reading for professional development.
- To form, discover and enjoy a new community of colleagues and fellow writers.

RATIONALE

Successful responses aren't natural, but learned behaviors. Until recently, most response to writing in school was evaluative (a.k.a. writing "rules" based on grammar). Thus, for most people, successful ways to talk about writing must be re-learned.

Through successful small group sharing, writers develop: 1) the emotional and social motivation to continue writing, 2) a sense of how readers actually read, perceive or react to their writing, and 3) an opportunity to share and develop writing strategies for addressing the problems that come up in their writing. These benefits are substantial.

An unsuccessful small response group, however, can be one of the most painful and most difficult educational moments for both teacher and student or for workshop participants. When groups don't work, writers feel isolated from each other, get terminally bored, or endure painful slash-and -burn sessions. Authors lose any motivation they had for writing and resist comments they receive.

The small-group sharing process works well and offers positive growth for all involved.

PROCEDURE

Participants bring copies of their writing and an author's note for each member of the group. This piece, and author's note, will be read aloud to the group by the author. Generally the author's note should be read first to help group members understand the needs and concerns for the author. After reading the piece aloud, participants will <u>verbally</u> respond to the piece as directed in the author's note using the notes taken during the narration.

CONTEXT

In order for small groups to work well and aid in the writer's development, groups need to meet regularly -- ideally once per week. It is assumed that every participant will have a <u>new writing piece</u> or a significantly revised piece accompanied by a thoughtful, constructive author's note.

TENETS

The first step any group needs to take is to consider the two major roles of the group: task and social maintenance. People in the group need to feel that they are getting help with their writing from the group (task) but also that their contributions to the group are valued and that the group itself is functioning productively (social maintenance). In order to accomplish both roles consider the following:

- SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT: a sense that their ideas and words are listened to, considered, and supported in the positive areas. Making comments directly on the

paper as someone is reading would be the ideal way to remind yourself about the great parts of his or her writing.

- IDENTIFICATION OF TROUBLE SPOTS: explanations of how the parts of the writing that concern the author affect the readers of the group; explanations about the reactions to trouble spots identified by the author.
- PROCESS STRATEGIES: suggesting a range of strategies they might try to go further within their writing. Follow the lead of the Author's Note. Make sure that everyone in the group has time to read. Someone needs to function as a "time monitor" each time the group meets in order to ensure that this task is accomplished. Never skip an author or "save it for next week."

SOCIAL MAINTENANCE

- Realize that the group usually goes through a process often referred to as Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing. Once the groups are formed, members need to recognize that the storming part may come when you have to set the dates, time and place for meetings. Hopefully, norming will follow soon after and a comfortable routine becomes obvious. Writers perform by sharing, responding to and editing the work.
- During oral response, always be mindful of what kind of response has been requested by the author in their author's note. Only give the type of response that is requested. Always bless, but address the author's concerns and press with new ideas or corrections only when specifically asked to do so by the author.
- If there is time at the end of the session, it is productive to create reflective writing about what has just been heard. That reflection can also be shared at the end of group time with group members or the instructor as a tool to evaluate group progress.
- *Writers write best when they know they are in an environment that is based on trust and where confidentiality is promised. Support is key to developing a productive writing community*.

Final Self-Assessment Portfolio

For April meeting -- Professional Development Hour

A Reading-Response Table of Portfolios:

- Each participant will:
  Compile an Embedded Writing Institute portfolio (in a 3-ring binder please)
  Read and respond to several other portfolios

- The portfolio that documents and reflects your work as a writer and teacher this year will include:
  1) The writing you have done during the Institute (Personal writing; drafts, revisions)
  2) Your teaching examples concerning writing during the 2012-13 school year (Best lesson plan, ideas, journals, etc.)
  3) Responses to professional reading (Professional responses, drafts, questions, etc.)

[Organize this work to show what you accomplished.]

You will keep this portfolio of your writing, but will share its contents at the April meeting.

For the Final Evaluation

To bring closure to the North Star Embedded Writing Institute for the 2012-2013 school year, you will write what is called a "Letter of Learning." This letter will be a reflection of what you learned as an educator, a teacher and as a person.

Address the following and feel free to add more as it may occur to you:

- How have you grown as writer? How does your work show that? How will your growth transfer into your work with students? Have your students increased their critical thinking skills?

- How have you networked with other teachers? How will this networking lead to greater collective excellence in teaching in Nebraska schools? In the district? At North Star? How has it already helped you, and how will it continue? How will this impact writing across the curriculum?

- How are you claiming your place as a professional, a teacher-leader, in the Institute, in teaching writing and as you interact with faculty and administration at your school, district, community?

- What are your follow-up plans after the Writing Institute when writing in the classroom? Who will your audience be and how will your reach them? How will you reach out to other teachers, students, parents and the Lincoln Public School or Lincoln community?

This Institute was formed as a part of the Seed Grant Process of the National Writing Project and your documentation will show what North Star has accomplished to improve teaching and learning through the use of this grant money. This documentation will prove that this Writing Institute has supported the goals of the National Writing Project by:

- Immersing teachers in their own writing, so that they can use their own experience in teaching students and creating contexts for student growth in writing;
- Connecting teachers to a network of other teachers, so that they can draw on collective excellence;
- Helping teachers claim their own power as teacher-leaders who can foster excellence in writing education throughout their schools, ESUs, and communities.

For your own documentation and reference, we suspect you may also need and want your letters and portfolios as proof of the great things you have accomplished and will continue to accomplish with your students.

We will need **three copies** of your letter of learning. You will turn in one to the facilitators and will be used by the Nebraska Writing Project and the National Writing Project. The other will be turned in to Melanie to be used by North Star to evaluate the North Star Writing Institute. And one of those letters should be **included in your portfolio**.

Thanks so much.

Welcome to Everyone!

OVERVIEW

We're eager to begin our 2013-14 North Star Interdisciplinary Embedded Writing Institute funded by Humanities Nebraska and in partnership with the Nebraska Writing Project. We recognize that, for the sake of our students, it is imperative that all teachers view themselves as teachers of writing and that we create opportunities for real writing in all classes. One primary goal with our work with content-area writing is to make writing a necessary and authentic part of students' daily lives -- recognizing how writing helps us to connect with our students, our students to connect with the content/instruction, and our students to connect with the expectations of written communication in the world around them.

As leaders at North Star come together for this work, we will research professional studies on writing across the content areas to help set goals for the future staff development and work of North Star. This research will take place outside of meeting times which will be reserved for writing and exploring what we see working in the classroom as well as working with guest speakers who have successfully implemented writing across the content areas in their schools.

Throughout our process we must keep before us the goals that we will: 1) research new ideas in the field of content writing, 2) document our attempts to implement these ideas, and 3) present our findings to the stakeholders in our writing inquiry.

With this welcome overview you are receiving the text *Because Writing Matters* written collaboratively by the National Writing Project. Your first task is to read this first professional development material prior to our October meeting. Take the time to note points of interest as you are reading. Also be prepared to share questions that occur to you as you read the text. Your notes and inquiry will be shared at our first meeting.

MEETINGS

We will meet once a month, from 3:30-5:30. Our first meeting will be on Wednesday, October 9. At that meeting we will set our dates for the rest of the year.

Once a quarter we will also hold meetings on Saturday mornings from 9:00-11:00. Tentatively, these dates are: October 26, February 1, April 26

On May 2 we will share our research work with colleagues at the Nebraska Writing Project's spring gathering hosted on the UNL city campus.

On Thursday, May 8, we will host a public forum at North Star to share our findings in a poster presentation to parents, students, colleagues, district administrators, and other interested stakeholders.

The texts provided by the grant funding are:
Because Writing Matters; National Writing Project
Content-Area Writing; Harvey Daniels, Steven Zemelman, and Nancy Steineke
Writing Instruction that Works: Proven Methods for Middle and High School; Arthur Applebee and Judith Langer.

The goal of writing across the curriculum is to help all students—not just those enrolled in English classes—see the relevance of writing to communicate their thinking. Our students can only benefit from an increase in legitimate opportunities to write. We foresee that continuing to bring together members of various departments to work in a small group of committed thoughtful educators focused on a common goal will strengthen the culture and the effectiveness of our school.

We look forward to working with each of you!

For our first meeting on October 9:

1. Please have read *Because Writing Matters* (you are welcome to write in the book!)
2. Please do some professional writing and/or reflection about that reading.
   Ideas: What stood out to you? What was important to you? What do you feel good about? What questions do you have? How do you see this information being relevant and/or important to us as we move forward?
   We encourage you to have this reflection typed up and ready to share at our meeting.
3. Please join our Edmodo group.

   Looking forward to getting started on our work together!

Teacher Presentations

Vital to the Nebraska Writing Project and the North Star Interdisciplinary Embedded Writing Institute is the time we spend discussing what works (or what we're trying, hoping it works) in our classrooms. The aim of the Institute is to experience, explore, discuss and strategize how we can improve writing and the implementation of writing in our classrooms throughout all disciplines while still honoring the core work done in all disciplines. With this aim in mind, we ask you to develop and **use some strategy from your actual action plan** that utilizes writing in a unique way and share it with us using the National Writing Project model.

Directions for Best Practice/Lesson Plan/Action Plan
The presentation takes two forms: oral presentation and written report.
Copies of your written report should be distributed to all members of the Institute.

We also ask that this lesson plan demonstrate the professional reading, writing and exploring you have discovered in this Institute. Following your idea of how to construct a well-written lesson plan, the model you share should include, but is not limited to, the following:

- What did you ask your students to do?
- Why did you do it? → Cite research that supports your reasoning.
- How was it received in the classroom?
- Who benefited from this activity?
- How would you change the activity?

Include personal reflections over your experience, questions for future applications and ideas for applying this lesson in other classes.

Please note that your lesson plan should be detailed enough that participants from this Institute or teachers attending your presentation, could recreate the activity when they pull it out of their files next year.

Thus, when you present:
15-20-ish minutes = explain the writing task you asked students to do and perhaps have us try to do it too. (Ex: author's notes, dialogue journal, critical reflections) It's helpful if we get a taste of what it is you did or will be asking students to try.

10-15-ish minutes = questions from your 'audience' (the rest of us), problem-solving (if the activity didn't produce what you were hoping for), or ideas for changing/adapting the writing task.