Chapter XVII
Stepping into the Role of Professional Writer

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ABSTRACT

A group of National Writing Project teachers from around the nation attended a Professional Writing Retreat in Santa Fe in 2004 and continued their collaboration. This chapter examines the progress of the group's commitment to communicate by electronic means about writing about teaching. Teachers from the experimental group, those who answered the call to examine their continued involvement with the group, provide qualitative research narratives about how each responds as they help one another to step into the role of professional writer. Statistics gathered from both the experimental and a control group of teachers (who attended the same retreat but did not answer the survey) allow the reader to chart the teachers' success in: (a) presenting together about being professional writers, (b) writing together as professional writers, (c) writing individually about teacher-practice, and (d) meeting at the National Writing Project's Annual Meeting in order to continue to support each other's work.

INTRODUCTION

The authors of this chapter are National Writing Project (NWP) teacher-consultants teachers from various sites in the United States who applied to an advanced institute called the National Writing Project's Professional Writing Retreat A. The four-day workshop focused on providing support for educators to help us publish our work. The retreat was open only to teachers who had attended one of the NWP's Invitational Summer Institutes for teachers. Thus, this professional writing retreat was considered an advanced institute for Writing Project teachers or teacher consultants.

The authors are teachers who participated in the 2004 Professional Writing Retreat A (There is also a retreat B that helps those with finished pieces). Participants were offered a group list-serve so that they could introduce themselves before the retreat and continue professional conversations after the retreat. The 2004 Retreat A group accepted this offer as a valid ongoing opportunity. Several participants have continued to collaborate electronically in order to grow professionally. This chapter will examine the ongoing collaborations after the Professional Writing Retreat A in 2004. To date, in addition to informal opportunities for peers to provide feedback such as revising or editing, there have been seven opportunities for the larger group to work together. The seven formal opportunities included breakfast meetings at the National Writing Project's Annual Meetings in 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007; a presentation at the National Writing Project's annual meeting in Pittsburgh, PA in 2005; one at the National Council for the Teachers of English (NCTE) Conference in New York City in 2007; and the opportunity to write this chapter collectively. Furthermore, the fact that a sizable group answered each of these calls is part of the serendipitous way in which group members have been able to work together; certainly the electronic conversations are at the heart of the group's success.

In this study we examined the following questions:

1. What percentage of our group reengages for each event that the entire group is invited to participate in?
2. How do group presentations and group writing help encourage each individual teacher as a researcher?

Group members hope to prove to ourselves and to a larger group of Writing Project teachers that an ongoing research connection among reflective practitioners can be energizing. The case documenting that synergistic connection is presented through analysis of survey data from the experimental group (the 47% of 2004 Retreat Group A group that coauthored this chapter), through narrative documentation of the members' synergistic cooperation, and through commentary from experimental group members about what being involved in these collaborations means for us. Finally, statistics are offered on the number of individuals from the experimental group who has been involved in publishing professional writing versus the number from the control group, those who did not collaborate this chapter (53%). Research is both qualitative and quantitative; the National Writing Project encourages narrative reflection, and the writing that we have done about our writing informs this chapter.

Group members designed a reflective instrument to measure further involvement in professional writing by those from 2004 Retreat A group. The intent was to discover if members have continued to write about their practice (i.e., continued to be reflective practitioners) attempted to become professional research writers by submitting their work to professional journals, bulletins, magazines; continued to use other members of the group as collaborative partners; and whether or not collective work is synergistic for them.

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