

# **Building the Capacity of Writing Project Site Leadership**

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## *Intentional Leadership Development: Doing the Work*

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## *Returning to the Roots of True Teacher Leadership*

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## *Whatever It Takes*

**Paul Epstein, Central West Virginia Writing Project**

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## Introduction

Lucy Ware  
Western Pennsylvania Writing Project

To maintain their commitment to a site, teachers need truly meaningful work. Teacher leadership drives the work of the Writing Project. The narratives in this collection, written by three veteran teacher-consultants, demonstrate many ways in which teacher leadership builds the capacity of any National Writing Project site to do its work. Simply put, a Writing Project site depends upon teacher leadership to sustain its community. An NWP site's community builds individual teachers' leadership abilities—but the site cannot exist and grow without that very leadership. To sustain this reciprocal relationship, both the NWP network as a whole and the teachers connected with individual sites need to pay careful attention to building site capacity.

Sites nurture individual teachers' leadership abilities by providing substantial and flexible opportunities for leadership tied to the passions of the educators. Running invitational summer institutes, planning and carrying out professional development programs, and facilitating continuity—the three core components of the NWP model—each provide powerful leadership experiences for teachers and ensure the ongoing health of any NWP site.

Three stories of teacher leadership provide examples of structures and processes that sites can examine as they seek to expand leadership and create their own opportunities for teachers to lead:

C. Lynn Jacobs, *Intentional Leadership Development: Doing the Work*  
Karen Smith, *Returning to the Roots of True Teacher Leadership*

Paul Epstein, *Whatever It Takes*

As Lynn Jacobs' narrative illustrates, a teacher's involvement in leadership may start small, but when the work is meaningful, her capacity for leadership will be enhanced. At heart, Lynn's story is about mentorship. Her reflection on turning points in her journey strikes a universal chord: the give and take of collegial relationships, the ambiguity in roles, and the perceptions of inclusion and exclusion in leadership circles. Lynn's growth emerges from her persistence. As she grows, she envisions how the abilities of other colleagues can be expanded as well. Her story teaches us that by recognizing the skills a colleague might bring to the process, leaders can imagine and implement improved programs for the site as a whole.

Capacity building by enhancing individual teacher-leaders takes time. Because NWP sites depend upon this careful, reflective, and collaborative work, they are relatively fragile communities, dependent upon sustained, shared leadership. When this wavers, a site must refocus and regain a strong capacity. In Paul Epstein's and Karen Smith's narratives, we see two leaders who discover how to reignite and refocus their own energies and tap the passion of other teachers to benefit the site.

The Writing Project is collaborative and each author elicited the support of his or her Writing Project site and colleagues. They discovered ways to find and attract new members for the site. Karen Smith envisioned a new structure, the return institute, to build capacity. She recognized that her Writing Project site needed teacher-leaders and, given the right conditions and support, they would emerge. Paul Epstein describes, from

the inside out, the ebb and flow of site development. His story inspires, as he shows how he utilizes university and NWP resources for the ultimate benefit of his local site.

These narratives show how each leader developed over time, was nurtured, and responded to a need or challenge. They took a stand, based on their beliefs and understanding of the power of the Writing Project as a professional community. They built communities in which lifelong learners could reflect, improve upon their craft, and share with others. The work being done at an NWP site may change, but the core beliefs and values guiding that work remain the same.

We hope that leaders of local NWP sites will discover that challenges they face are not unique and will see adaptable strategies to apply in their own specific settings. By sharing these stories, we also hope that individual teacher-consultants will recognize the importance of their leadership to their local sites and will see ways that the NWP network might support their ongoing professional development.





## **Intentional Leadership Development: Doing the Work**

**By C. Lynn Jacobs  
Northern California Writing Project**

For a Writing Project site to grow and increase its effectiveness, it must deliberately increase its teacher-consultants' leadership capacity. Limiting leadership to only a few individuals greatly reduces the quality and quantity of service a site can provide. In this piece, I examine my own growth as a leader and a mentor, and along with mine, the parallel growth of a colleague. These cases provide a jumping-off point for discussing intentional leadership development.

My participation in the Northern California Writing Project, based at California State University, in Chico, began in 1996. I attended the invitational summer institute twice, and loved everything about the Writing Project. The professional development was smart, the people were thoughtful, and I always learned new things. I eagerly attended every meeting to which I was invited, because they helped me grow in my ability as a teacher. I developed two presentations that I could give if asked. The first one was a scaffolded writing activity that was based on song lyrics. The second was a synthesis of a teacher inquiry project I had done with a group of high school English learners over a two-year period. I was particularly excited about the second presentation, and loved being asked to give it. The Writing Project was my mentor, my chance to learn from others. Initially, it did not occur to me to assume a leadership role

in the Writing Project, although I was already a leader and advocate for English learners in my high school.

### **Waking Up to Leadership**

My leadership in the Writing Project began unintentionally, at least for me. For a couple of years, I had been traveling around a bit, giving my presentations. They were always received well. Yet I sensed that I was receiving more than I was giving. One evening, I was returning from a far-away conference with my colleague Rochelle Ramay, a brilliant teacher and gifted presenter. (Geographically, our site's area is huge, approximately the size of Ohio, so teacher-consultants must travel long distances.) It is difficult to fly under the radar with Rochelle. On this night she asked me what my intentions with the Writing Project were, because I was hanging around a lot without doing much. I felt put on the spot. I just wanted to be part of the deal. So far that had involved giving one of my two presentations whenever invited. How could I even think about going beyond that? Would I be welcome to do so? What did I know that could benefit the Writing Project? I thought you had to be invited in, because someone perceived you had something to offer.

I teach English learners. Even my most advanced students had needs that were very different from the AP and college prep students I kept hearing about in other teacher-consultants' presentations. At that time, I could not see that my perspective was exactly what my Writing Project site needed. Because of my work with English learners, I had a contrasting viewpoint which would enable us to reach a broader base in our work with schools.

My conversation with Rochelle woke me up. At first, I had wanted to scurry back to my classroom where I felt competent, loved, and respected. But something about the Writing Project kept me holding on. Rochelle had made me think critically about what I had to give and what I wanted to gain from being involved. I decided to find out how I could offer something of value.

### **Learning to Lead by Helping**

A few months after this conversation, Rochelle asked me to help her and Peter Kittle, another Writing Project colleague, present a professional development institute, funded by the state of California. These institutes were designed to help teachers learn better ways to teach reading and writing and were offered over a period of several years. They were eventually discontinued by the state, to be replaced by training for the use of scripted reading programs. I was pleased to be asked, although Rochelle didn't really tell me much about it, or what she expected of me. Rochelle and Peter had a specific structure in mind, and at our planning meetings we were deciding what articles to read and finalizing who would present each part. Aside from my two presentations, I had no experience with the design and structure of professional development. I did not know how to contribute, so I listened and tried not to look lost.

In the early days of the institute, I could not figure out why I had been invited to be there. Finally I asked what I should be doing, and said that I was sure I had not been asked just to organize office supplies and pass out chocolate. I was given a little something to present about using graphic organizers to plan a piece of writing. Meanwhile, by attending these sessions, I realized that I could transfer much of what I

was learning here to my teaching of English learners, and increase the rigor of my own classes. I also began speaking up in defense of English learners and other students who were not in AP classes, asking how a strategy could be applied with them, or how an idea related to their learning. While the sessions remained Rochelle's show, I kept coming back and facilitating the small pieces she requested.

Rochelle and I continued to travel together to various Writing Project conferences, and as I knew her better I lost my intimidation. Often as we drove she would go through the presentation and ask for my advice. I learned that she was concerned about coming on too strong, fearing she might skip important background knowledge in her impatience to get to the point. Slowly, I found places to jump in and add; I found ways that I could complement Rochelle's plan, and my confidence grew. I was no longer *only* in charge of the highlighters, Post-its, and chocolate. After performing increasingly complex tasks over a period of time I finally felt that I had something to offer, and that I was truly a part of the sessions.

As my competence and confidence in facilitating grew, so did my feeling of belonging to our Writing Project site in general. My ideas were welcomed and listened to, and I began to be asked to participate in other site activities and professional development opportunities. For example, when a well-known presenter cancelled at the last minute, I was asked to give a presentation for a California Writing Project conference. This presentation was about using illustrated idea maps as a way to plan a piece of writing, and was surprisingly (to me) well received.

Rochelle turned out to be a great mentor. She let me work side-by-side with her while developing my own strength and confidence, until I was ready to stand up and talk about what I knew. She set a high standard, and then demonstrated that she respected my ability. Her attention and response to my ideas showed me that I had something to offer. Her mentorship had everything to do with my growth as a leader in the Writing Project. She saw something in me that I didn't see, and just kept pushing at me until I could let it out, and stand with it. She made room for me to assume a role of leadership in the Writing Project site at the time I was ready to do so, and I grew from being her student to being her collaborator. And, in the process, I learned to design and lead professional development.

### **Becoming a Mentor**

Several years ago I mentored the growth in leadership of Charlie, who was then a new teacher-consultant. Our Writing Project site was part of NWP's National Reading Initiative, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The project examined teachers' use of content-based reading practices and strategies. Our site director, Tom Fox, invited me to participate because I had leadership experience and could foster the growth of another's leadership capacity. The region's size makes it difficult for those living in more remote areas to participate in the leadership of the site, so there is a tendency for only a few people to take on a great deal of the work of the site. Our site needed to develop new leaders. My job was to help Charlie to develop as a leader for our site. He would be in charge of our team and I would support him in this role.

At first this was uncomfortable. Charlie had no experience leading professional development. I had ideas about what sorts of strategies worked, and how things should be arranged for the smoothest development of our project, yet I was not in charge. And I had never mentored another person in this manner. At times I did things just to get them done. It never occurred to me to ask Charlie what he hoped to offer the site, or if this was what he wanted. We were both doing as we'd been asked because of our immense respect for our site director. Many times Charlie verbalized his questions about having been placed in this leadership position, saying openly that he had no idea what to do next. I could see that he would be a fine leader once he realized he could do it, and I tried to be encouraging, yet often I, too, questioned the timing.

Charlie and I designed a series of professional development sessions with math, science, and social science teachers. We focused on reading strategies for nonfiction, content-based materials. I felt it was important that Charlie be in charge of the sessions. If he was to grow, he had to function and be seen as a leader by the participants. My work with Rochelle had taught me that the development of this perception of leadership was something that had to be fostered gradually, as the fledgling leader was ready to accept it, yet we had little time to just let this feeling grow for Charlie.

One advantage was that Charlie taught history, while I taught English language development. Because of this, I believed that he had greater credibility with other content area teachers. It seemed like a refreshing change to hear from one of their own, rather than another English teacher. During the sessions I tried to stay in the

background as much as I could, fearing that if I stepped up and did a formal presentation to this group, I would usurp Charlie's leadership role.

At times, my strategy backfired. In one session, we had planned a presentation carefully, understanding that Charlie would present it to the group. Yet when Charlie tried to deliver a session that had been my idea, I suddenly realized that he had not understood the session as I had; it didn't work. I had believed we had the same idea and only later realized that our ideas of the final result were completely different. I had a mental picture based on something I had done in the past; he hadn't experienced the same thing, which seriously compromised the integration of our ideas. The idea had to be his, not mine.

Trying to present someone else's idea always raises the possibility of a shaky or uncertain delivery, and having experienced this, I knew it. For me to step in and re-explain during the presentation would have undermined him as a leader, yet people were a little confused. After the session ended, we discussed it and let it go, yet it had embarrassed Charlie, shaking his sense of capability.

Over time, Charlie and I developed a strong interaction when it came to presentations. We looked at all the material we wanted to share in a half-day session of the professional development series we were leading. We began by blocking out the time, so we knew how long we had for each segment of the morning. We'd look at the concepts we wanted to work with and decide how much time to allocate to each. Then we'd talk about how Charlie taught those ideas in his classes, and how that could be communicated to our participants. He was a very creative teacher and always had

good ideas for scaffolding his students' learning. Planning our sessions in this manner resulted in a better presentation because he had a deep knowledge of his own teaching and presented it clearly and with enthusiasm. This was a far cry from his trying to present a strategy or way of teaching that was not actually part of his own practice. The difference between the two outcomes was a reminder to me of my own difficulty in presenting material that was someone else's good idea.

I still have questions about how to balance "handing over the reins" of leadership to another with grace and fluidity. Clearly, the receiver of the leadership must be aware of the goal of developing in this vein, be ready to accept the role, and have some idea of how to carry it.

Although he took his leadership role seriously and diligently participated in every aspect of the project in which we were involved, his confidence might have grown more smoothly had he been able to ease into the job, learning more gradually and perhaps with more specific guidance from me.

### **Reflecting on Intentional Leadership Development**

As I reflect on these two cases of leadership development, I realize we could have all benefited from greater transparency about the processes that were underway. I was well mentored by Rochelle. However, I believe my own sense of confidence would have grown more quickly had I been told specifically what was expected in the beginning, rather than figuring it out. In mentoring Charlie, I could have used explicit suggestions about how to effectively help Charlie take on new roles. Without being the



one leading the work, I was uncertain how to participate. Yet, it didn't occur to me to ask for help in either situation.

Through writing and reflecting, I have identified principles for developing leadership to help guide me and others in the future.

**Noticing resources.** Leaders of invitational summer institutes should be conscious of noticing the resources that exist within the new group of teacher-consultants that pass through the institute each year, and identifying potential NWP leaders. These people should be invited to participate further in the activities of the site, just as Charlie and I were.

**Planning transitions into leadership.** Connecting a new teacher-consultant with a mentor should be a conscious decision, with a carefully planned on-ramp to full site participation. For example, although new teacher-consultants are carefully coached in the summer institute about the presentation they will give there, the coaching doesn't always extend beyond that first institute.

The new teacher-consultants have their presentation ready to give wherever needed. As their participation in professional development activities deepens, continued coaching on the needs of their expanded role would help them develop both skill and understanding of the overall process. The role of the new participants should be clearly defined at first, allowing them to fully participate within the extent of their understanding at that time. Then gradually, they can begin to create their own way of doing things as their understanding grows.

**Making knowledge transparent, asking questions.** The mentor needs to be aware that what is transparent to an experienced facilitator may not be as clear to someone new or may be seen differently by that person. Presentation planning should be led by the person who will be presenting, with support from the mentor. While the presenter knows his or her own classroom practice and what works there, the jump to sharing it with others is sometimes surprisingly difficult. The mentor can be an invaluable help by asking procedural questions, such as “Explain how you present this in your classroom,” and then listening for gaps in the communication of the material and asking more questions. Often we know how we work with our students, and assume others will understand more of the nonverbal interaction than they do. The mentor can help close the communication gaps by careful listening and questioning. Once the presenter finds the idea, the mentor can help facilitate with structures that may make the presentation smoother. For the mentee, it is important to ask questions when any feeling of uncertainty arises, and to ask if the mentor has any ideas for smoothing out any rough spots in the planned presentation.

Having traveled this path to leadership and having looked at it more closely, I think I have a clearer idea of how leadership is developed. Perhaps it develops because one does the work, but there must also be an intention to develop the skills to lead if one is to be the most effective leader possible. I realize that not everyone is interested or willing to do what it takes to lead. Some prefer to stay back and do the work of the site, allowing others to whom it comes more easily to step up and lead the way.

I thought that I became a leader just by doing the work, that it had just kind of sneaked up on me, but now I realize that isn't exactly true. In my work with my Writing Project site, I became a leader gradually, participating in a peripheral way, taking on more and more as my skills grew. In working with Charlie, I learned to support another person in developing his leadership capacity, and in doing so developed my own on a deeper level as I thought about what was needed for him and the project to be successful, and about how to work through mistakes that I hadn't been able to foresee. I now believe that leadership is about standing behind our passions and being always willing to try new things, to learn from others, and above all to change ourselves. I have learned that Writing Project site leaders need to intentionally develop leadership among teacher-consultants who pass through the invitational summer institute. Clearly not all teacher-consultants will become active site leaders. However, when everyone understands the intention to create a broader base of leadership, the result is likely to be stronger leaders, better communication throughout the site, and an increased ability for the site to provide effective professional development.



## **Returning to the Roots of True Teacher Leadership**

**By Karen Smith  
Area 3 Writing Project**

Ideally, when a director retires or resigns, NWP sites put transition plans into place that allow the site to grow and develop naturally. Unfortunately, this wasn't the case at my site, the Area 3 Writing Project (A3WP) at UC Davis in northern California. Although one director planned her retirement well in advance, the promising new director resigned within a year due to an unexpected and serious health issue. We found ourselves without a director and in danger of losing our funding, so our site leadership team was forced to rethink the future of our site. Although we initially had only a partial view of the "big picture" of how local sites operate, we took on this challenge with assistance from others within the NWP community. As our site grew, I too evolved—from an uncertain leader to a site director who actively cultivates new leaders for our site.

### **Facing Our Site's Transition**

In spring 2005, Jayne Marlink, executive director of the California Writing Project, the state's network, met with our leadership team and told us that we had to come up with a "transition plan" in order to keep our funding. The plan needed to describe the projected organization and goals for an invitational summer institute, identify a transition team to carry out A3WP's administrative responsibilities for the upcoming school year, and outline and launch a search process for a permanent director. I remember thinking, "They can't make me do anything I don't want to do. I don't *have* to be involved in A3WP forever. It's time to take a break and let someone

else step in.” But, deep down in my heart, I knew that abandoning these colleagues and friends, who were probably feeling the same way, wasn’t possible. We were all in this together. Reluctantly, I agreed to serve as co-director with two other teacher-consultants, and, along with our full-time teaching jobs, it was our responsibility to keep A3WP running as a site. We co-directors, along with the rest of the ten-member leadership team who had lived through three director changes in eight years, set out to see the site through the transition.

### **Modeling Collaborative Leadership**

Because of our transition, holding a regular invitational summer institute seemed impossible. After all, the site now had three new co-directors, and none of us had ever run a summer institute before. Because we clearly needed to build site leadership, I suggested that we hold a return institute and invite teacher-consultants from the previous five years’ institutes. We sought to breathe new life into A3WP by reconnecting with teacher-consultants with whom we had lost touch and encouraging some new blood to become involved in leadership at the site. After receiving permission from CWP’s executive director and the folks at NWP to deviate from the regular summer institute model for one year, we began our planning.

Six teacher-consultants agreed to serve on the return institute planning team and met several times before the June start date. Knowing our teacher-consultants’ busy schedules, we decided to block out three weeks for the return institute rather than the typical four weeks so we’d be able to get more commitment. We identified three core goals for the institute: build and maintain leadership, provide a plan for site-

sponsored professional development in our service area, and keep teacher-consultants connected. These goals reflected the most pressing needs for our site; strengthening these areas would provide a solid base for our site's growth.

On a Saturday one month before the institute, we held an orientation day where thirteen enthusiastic and hard-working teacher-consultants joined the six-member leadership team. At the orientation we included writing activities, which allowed the group to get to know one another and also kept a strong focus on one core component of Writing Project summer institutes: writing. We posted our three goals, and asked the teacher-consultants to brainstorm ideas for strengthening these areas by adding sticky notes to each poster. We created categories from this initial brainstorming, and hung the resulting planning documents on the wall during the institute. We referred to them often as we engaged in more specific planning. (Our charts are included in the appendix.)

Along with our leadership-building activities, the return institute still included the core components of an NWP summer institute: demonstrations, writing and response groups, and reading. However, not every teacher-consultant gave a demonstration, and we focused the readings on site leadership issues rather than classroom practice. We kept the writing component more typical: teacher-consultants could choose to write in any genre; we held writing response groups two to three times per week; we published an anthology; and each participant shared a piece of writing aloud on the last day.

As a planning team member, I pushed for an open-ended agenda that would offer teacher-consultants a stronger role in creating the institute and making future plans for A3WP. We weren't sure what would happen every day, and we wanted to allow time for development of big ideas and "ah-ha" moments. Since our foremost goal was to build leadership, *all* participants needed to play a role in formulating the return institute's tasks.

Accustomed to having the institute schedule laid out in advance with little room for adaptation, some participants found the openness of the agenda uncomfortable and requested a daily schedule with more structure. But the planning team held firm to our design, asking participants to trust the process and allow the institute to take shape as needed. Once things started falling into place, participants could see where A3WP was headed, and by the final week, they were getting the "big picture."

For this institute, we created a conceptual if not a schedule-based structure. Focusing planning sessions and small group work on the three main goals (leadership capacity, continuity, and inservice) made it possible for the participant teams to come up with solid plans. Committees worked on specific topics such as young writers' camps, teacher research groups, writing groups, super Saturdays, and school inservice. These groups set goals for each major program activity, and teacher-consultants agreed to take responsibility for making sure that tasks were accomplished. As each committee's work finished, the teacher-consultants moved on to other committees.

With a large block of time, and the people and resources to make concrete plans, the return institute succeeded as a rich time of drawing together to recreate and rethink



A3WP's structure. Because the vision and planning came from the teacher-consultants, they could see themselves as a core component of A3WP's teacher leadership structure.

### **Enlarging the Leadership Pool**

At the return institute, we sought to expand the number of teacher-consultants actively involved in site leadership. We worked together to identify other teacher-consultants who were unable to attend but who might want to get reinvolved during the school year. We created a list, and teacher-consultants volunteered to personally invite each person to reconnect with our site's work.

In addition, the three co-directors extended an open invitation to all participants to join our monthly leadership meetings, and we hoped a few would take us up on the offer. These teacher-consultants had enjoyed their first summer institute experiences, but had had few opportunities for continued involvement with the A3WP community. Because continuity activities had not been a focus, the teachers weren't sure what their place was in the Writing Project. The return institute provided them with another start, a way to get connected again.

In the midst of the institute, I realized that a few participants were rising to the top as leaders. I watched closely as teacher-consultants volunteered to lead projects such as inquiry groups, young writers' camps, and a secondary leadership team. I quietly identified five people who had taken on fairly strong roles during institute brainstorming and planning sessions and who I wanted to push toward more leadership when the school year started. At that point, I wasn't quite sure how this would happen, but I knew that these were people who we needed to keep connected. Just as teacher-consultants

followed up with those who were unable to attend the institute, I followed up the general invitation to join the leadership team with phone calls and emails. I remembered how I had felt as a new teacher-consultant: it was hard for me to imagine, then, that I had much to offer. And I realized that these emerging leaders might be feeling the same way. Personally encouraging them to stay involved was something I knew I had to do.

### **Building Teacher-Leaders**

At the first leadership meeting of the year, I was thrilled that all five of those whom I had personally invited were there. The agenda was filled with reports of the return institute for those who hadn't attended and with brainstorming about future work. As seasoned teacher-consultants threw out acronyms and referred to past history and events, I saw the look of bewilderment and confusion on the faces of our newest members, and I could almost hear the question screaming in their heads, "What am I doing here?" Having been in their exact position ten years earlier when my director first asked me to come to leadership meetings, I knew how "out of it" they felt.

After the meeting, I thanked them for coming, and one said, "Well, I didn't have anything to add...." I told her that I had had those same feelings when I first became involved with A3WP leadership, and I asked her to be patient and give it some time. Assuring them that their presence meant the world to me and the other long-time teacher-consultants, I begged them to come to the next meeting and told them that this infusion of fresh faces helped those of us who had been around for a while feel reenergized, reinvigorated, and hopeful about A3WP's future. Each thanked me for the

reassurance while also restating their feelings of inadequacy. But they promised to come to the next meeting. I knew that nurturing and encouraging them would not only keep them coming but also help them see that they were an important voice for A3WP.

Over the course of that transition year, I could see changes in their faces; where once there were confusion and feelings of inadequacy, there were now commitment and loyalty to A3WP. We learned that once we gave new teacher-consultants solid roles in A3WP's leadership structure, they began to see themselves as the leaders they were. For example, some led young writers' camps and some facilitated inservice programs contracted by schools. Since then, two of the five have stayed actively involved with A3WP. Helping teacher-consultants see themselves as an integral part of A3WP's leadership was key to building our site's capacity.

Nicole, one of these new leaders, recently told me that she remembers passing notes to the other new teacher-consultants during those meetings with questions about why they were there, joking that they only came for the food. Now, as a strong member of A3WP's core leadership, she sees herself in a much different light. Time and connection with like-minded colleagues made the difference. Through collaborating with other teacher-consultants in inquiry groups, and planning and providing professional development, she has come to see herself playing a clearer role within A3WP's leadership structure. Part of this is due to more teaching experience, but she attributes most of this to being able to meet regularly with colleagues who are passionate about teaching writing and improving their practice. This exchange with her

colleagues—pushing each other to new levels of knowledge—has not only strengthened her teaching, it has also allowed her to see herself as a teacher-leader.

Nicole’s feedback and insights have helped me identify ways that we can make the transition for new A3WP leaders easier. Now we try to avoid using acronyms without explanation, and we provide more background about previous work. We also touch base with new teacher-consultants individually after leadership meetings, as some may be reluctant to speak up in the large group.

In the middle of the transition year, I realized that I was now on the other side of the fence from where I had been ten years earlier. It was my job to support and encourage teacher-consultants to step out as teacher-leaders. I helped them see their strengths and formulate plans for the kind of work they might want to do, and then let them do it. That’s what my director had done for me so many years previously when I was a new leader; she trusted me to do the job and do it well. She showed me that she had faith that I was ready, and she pushed me out of the nest. Now, as director, I am in the position of pushing these new leaders out of the nest and into new areas of leadership.

### **Becoming Stronger**

Being forced to rethink A3WP’s leadership structure has only caused us to become a stronger site. Holding the return institute and building a leadership structure that included three co-directors and a new cadre of teacher-consultants allowed us all to see A3WP in a new light. After that transition year, I secured a part-time teaching position which allowed me to serve as director for 60 percent time and freed the other

two co-directors from the administrative tasks they had taken on during the transition year. Once I became director, I met regularly with our principal investigator, who was a full-time faculty member. We discussed reporting and navigating the requirements of NWP and the university. In 2007, our principal investigator retired, and the director of the university writing program, who holds an endowed chair, became the new principal investigator. I have continued to work with him to secure additional space for the Writing Project and to work through challenging budget times within the university. In addition, we have developed a close working relationship with a faculty member who has deep expertise in technology and writing. In 2010, he participated in the invitational summer institute, and he is now working alongside teacher-consultants to expand the digital components of our work. He is also a resource for us in conducting evaluations about the impact of our work. This structure has worked well for A3WP, and with the support of NWP and the CWP executive director, we will continue this arrangement as long as possible. Since then, additional grant monies have allowed us to add two co-directors on part-time buyouts to strengthen secondary programs and leadership capacity.

Since the return institute in 2005, we have held four regular summer institutes, and my goal has been to keep as many of these new teacher-consultants connected as possible. By watching quietly and identifying strengths, I have been able to steer new fellows in directions where they are able to challenge themselves and grow as teachers and leaders. We have gone back to the roots of true teacher leadership, and, as director, I see a clear and purposeful opportunity to lead other teachers in the Writing

Project and to help them see themselves as teacher-leaders. Keeping teachers connected to each other and to the work of the Writing Project is the heart and soul of what we do. We are all in this together.

## Appendix Area 3 Writing Project Goals

### Build and Maintain Leadership

#### Expansion

- Ask teacher-consultants (TCs) we *know* who have leadership expertise to write proposals of what they would like to lead
- A3WP district mentors or leaders
- Invite potential teacher-leaders (from site) to attend a Writing Project offering
- Invite other TCs to Leadership Advisory Team meetings
- Bring a guest TC to Leadership Advisory Team meetings
- Cast a wide net and invite all past TCs to attend a Saturday leadership event. See who shows up and move forward from there

#### More Specific Leadership Roles

- Create smaller leadership teams (i.e. Elementary Leadership Team (ELT), Secondary Leadership Team (SLT), EL team, Genre Team...
- Teams or clusters based on segment or grade level: primary, intermediate, middle, high school
- Recurring meetings where leaders can share their work

#### Needs Assessments to identify specific areas of focus

- Teams visit schools to see what they need
- Create a needs assessment first, then build workshops based on those needs

#### Advanced Institutes (for TCs)

- Shorter duration of time with a specific focus (genre, assessment, traits, etc.)

### Provide Professional Development

#### Connections to district curriculum coordinators/administrators

- Collaboration with districts: teams of leaders from within districts to present to administrators a model or a variety of models/goals
- Create a needs assessment/survey for schools to identify areas of need for writing inservice
- Identify a person in each district to be a contact/liaison between A3WP and district

- Contact Program Improvement schools
- A3WP TCs present at district “buyback” days and ongoing visits throughout the year
- Invite district administrators to dinner that showcases mini-presentations
- Create a team of TCs willing to help curriculum directors determine what they want, laying groundwork for inservice and being willing to proactively develop relationships
- Connect with and create a partnership with CRTE initiative in Sac City
- TCs assigned to district/schools to work closely with curriculum director to develop plans

**BTSA (Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment)**

- Let BTSA leaders know what is available from A3WP
- Get involved with BTSA program and new teachers
- Provide inservice for BTSA
- Impregnate BTSA workshops; Go into colleges/teachers’ schools in inform new teachers

**Communication**

- Develop a brochure of programs offered; with quotes from happy customers
- Website: add blurbs about current programs, with opportunity to register online
- Website should include all services offered
- Emphasize how what we provide *enhances* rather than supplants already-adopted writing curricula
- Email newsletters to districts
- Create an i-movie using actual students/teachers

**Preservice**

- Reconnect or become more involved with teacher prep (credential) programs in the area (CSUS, UCD, National, Univ. of Phoenix, Chapman, etc.)

**Assessment**

- Helping districts/schools/teachers with entire assessment process (anchor papers, calibration, scoring, etc.)



#### **Young Writers' Camps**

- Young Writers' Camps with a professional development component (teachers run YWC and then are provided with inservice to help them work with those students)

#### **Student Writing Groups**

- TCs lead students in writing in after school clubs, etc.

### **Keep Teacher-Consultants Connected**

#### **District/School Level**

- School-based / district-based focus groups
- Encourage TCs to network at their own sites/districts through inquiry groups
- Create Writing Project clusters within districts throughout the area (i.e. Sac City Cluster)
- Build relationships with TCs in districts (e.g., coffee dates)

#### **Teaming**

- Teaming/presenting/planning in groups of 2 or 3
- More opportunities to present workshops to other TCs
- Bring-a-friend events with 5-10 minute presentations, testimonials, insights

#### **Support Groups**

- Drop-in support group monthly / No real agenda, make own
- Debriefings scheduled at periodic times

#### **Coaching/Mentoring**

- Each experienced TC partnering with a new TC to keep them connected
- Position of Outreach Coordinator to stay connected to previous TCs to create new roles for them

<p><b>TC Retreats/Social Events</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Regular social events combining all years of TCs</li> <li>→ Events just for TCs - rejuvenation time</li> <li>→ TC Retreats</li> </ul>
<p><b>Professional Groups</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Inquiry Groups</li> <li>→ Writing Groups</li> <li>→ Reading Groups</li> <li>→ Teacher Research Groups</li> <li>→ Reading/Writing Groups</li> </ul>
<p><b>Super Saturdays</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Create Super Saturday workshops specifically for TCs to come and learn and explore new concepts</li> <li>→ Offer Super Saturday series in other geographic areas</li> </ul>
<p><b>TCs on Leadership Advisory Team</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Invite TCs to join Leadership Advisory Team</li> <li>→ Leadership / grade Level teams</li> </ul>
<p><b>Young Writers' Camp</b></p>
<p><b>Defining Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Rebuild the A3WP house so new TCs know the different opportunities for getting involved</li> <li>→ Put out info on being a "second time around" especially for those who are changing grade levels</li> <li>→ Include a time for communication of future opportunities for the new TCs at the end of each Invitational Institute</li> </ul>
<p><b>Communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ Web blogs</li> <li>→ Send dynamic teams of TCs to district leadership meetings with colorful brochures and menus of offerings</li> <li>→ Email "conversations" to include all past TCs</li> <li>→ TC email/newsletter/calendar</li> <li>→ A3WP website redesigned</li> </ul>

**Writing Opportunities**

- Writing groups
- Writing field trips (e.g., zoo, old towns, parks, nature trails, historic buildings, arboretum, etc.)
- Web blog to share writing with other writers/TCs



**Whatever it Takes**  
**By Paul Epstein**  
**Central West Virginia Writing Project**

In 2001, the flickering candle of the West Virginia Writing Project went out. While contemplating the cold emptiness of the loss of my connection to the Writing Project, I felt the fire of leadership spark within me. This is the story of how I, an elementary school teacher, came to take responsibility for helping build a new site that would burn with a brighter and more sustainable flame.

**We're Doing Just Fine, Thank You**

Our site, founded in 1978 at a small graduate college with a strong rural outreach mission near Charleston, West Virginia, offered invitational summer institutes in a different county school district each year. Our director likened our role to that of circuit preachers, reaching distant congregations to spread the word, hoping each congregation would sustain itself in our absence. We did the best we could but, like many rural sites in NWP's early years, we had developed no inservice programs to sustain the site. As a result there was little in the way of "work" to keep teacher-consultants involved. Continuity activities consisted of one or two follow-up meetings with summer institute fellows each year and a retreat or open seminar led by a children's author or writing guru. Our summer institute touched lives, but when it was over, teachers went their separate ways, taking new practices back to their classrooms. In some schools, some districts, a spark would grow, and inservice would take place and be well received by teachers. But after a year or two only the memories of the warmth

of a learning community remained. Sometimes, a district contracted with the university for additional coursework that our director delivered herself, bringing in a teacher-consultant or two to present. The director did all the required work of the project, budgeting for and reporting on a site that maintained a small footprint.

I had been, since the mid-1990s, a somewhat reluctant teacher-leader. I fulfilled a limited role: invitational summer institute co-director. Another local teacher served as the site co-director, but what responsibilities she had, I didn't know. We had no meetings. As a busy elementary school classroom teacher, I had enough of a commitment with the four-week invitational summer institute, the NWP Annual Meeting, a Saturday or two during the school year, and an occasional workshop presentation. The Writing Project paid a nice little supplement to my perennially light teacher salary. Other teachers had summer jobs; this was mine.

To me, the invitational summer institute was the Writing Project: it had been the first time in my career I felt valued as a professional, and I loved passing that experience on to others. At the NWP Annual Meetings, I was a reluctant participant. I wasn't interested in all the site leadership issues described in the catalog; nor was I interested in learning about other sites' approaches to continuity or inservice programs. Because of its rural nature and the graduate college's limited resources, we had long believed that our site was not capable of building the programs larger sites could. NCTE sessions, held the same weekend as NWP's Annual Meeting at a nearby hotel, offered more for my classroom. Our invitational summer institutes were going just fine, thank you. Why would we change anything? A long-term stasis was achieved, one that allowed the

director and me to fulfill our roles spreading the National Writing Project philosophy one summer institute at a time.

### **Losing NWP Funding**

In 2001, when NWP cut off our fuel and denied funding to the West Virginia Writing Project, my personal flame ignited. A few months earlier when our director had asked me what we might do to increase inservice and continuity, I had thrown up my hands in bewilderment and self-protection, saying, “I’m already doing all that I can do.” When asked whether we should change our model from roving county to county to holding it in a stable location, as strongly suggested in a Continued Funding Application review letter, I’d felt incompetent to reply. I didn’t know enough about how other Writing Project sites worked or even much about the NWP model beyond “teachers teaching teachers to teach writing.” My response reinforced the director’s defense of our long-term program, which had been working, in our view—though maybe not as robustly as NWP intended.

Now I realized, unequivocally, that if I believed in this program, it was time for me to prove it. Selfishly, I did not want to contemplate the loss of what the Writing Project offered me: my annual renewal of creative energy at the summer institute, my nice little salary supplement that allowed me a few extras like a computer or a vacation. If, in order to keep that, I would have to learn how to develop a site that was strong and vibrant, one that did what our director in frustration had said couldn’t be done here, I would have to change the level of my commitment. I knew that the effort required would outstrip my compensation, and it would be a difficult challenge. But as I thought

back to my first few years as a classroom teacher, when I would fall asleep grading papers and work weekends on my lesson plans, I decided that having survived that, I would survive this. It was time for me to give back and build a fire for others to warm themselves.

### **Projecting Confidence**

The words that burned themselves into me, that became my passion and my fuel, and that provided me the energy to raise our site from the ashes—a Phoenix site—were simple and direct: “I will do whatever it takes.”

And so we decided to participate in the process of applying as a new site. I was resolute; I was steadfast; I was confident. Our director had planned to retire after a couple years and expressed concern that because hers was such a small institution it might be difficult to find a replacement. Her long commitment to and belief in the core values of the Writing Project prevailed. She arranged for us to go to the March 2001 Rural Sites Network retreat held on Alabama’s Gulf Coast. There, she introduced me as a dynamic leader who could provide the teacher leadership largely missing at our site to Joye Alberts, then NWP’s Associate Director. “What do we need to do to renew our Writing Project site?” I asked.

Joye explained that we needed to make our site a teacher-centered effort and invited us to apply for an NWP planning grant. Using the grant, we invited a group of teachers from around the state to meet with Joye. She walked us through the basics of NWP site structure, explaining how continuity can grow from successful inservice and meaningful work for teacher-consultants after the summer institute. These basics of the



NWP model had so long seemed outside the realm of possibility for our small, scattered rural site, that they were literally new to us. Joye inspired us all, including the director, to take a fresh look at what we might accomplish if we did some strategic planning. Our planning group, even though some were from distant areas, decided a new site would need to concentrate its energies in a smaller geographical area. We would start by creating an inservice program and building continuity in two large counties in the more developed Kanawha Valley, within which the home institution was centered.

### **Resurrecting a Phoenix Site**

Whatever it takes: collecting NWP resources. We held an open institute during the summer of 2001 in Kanawha County, where I work. We invited the participating teachers to name our new site. The Central West Virginia Writing Project was born. At the 2001 NWP Annual Meeting in Baltimore, I attended the Thursday site development sessions for the first time and listened to the Vermont Writing Project's plan for inservice, which was being published as part of the NWP at Work monograph series. I used these ideas as I worked closely with the director on the new-site application, setting new goals for inservice and continuity development. That spring, soon after we learned that our application had been approved by NWP, we made an appointment with an assistant superintendent of my county's school district. I presented a plan for a partnership agreement, based on the Vermont model, that included offering three five-session workshop series during the 2002-2003 school year. Our site had never before made the pitch for inservice on that scale. We were successful. The county would pay the Central West Virginia Writing Project to provide inservice—a first.

Whatever it takes: boldly implementing new programs. I planned three five-session series open to any teacher in our county. I coordinated the first one, and I recruited two other teacher-consultants to coordinate the others. I found, not surprisingly, that teachers were reluctant at first to take on additional work. I talked to people, I actively listened as they described the situations in life or school that enabled or prevented them taking on a new challenge, and I encouraged them to step up now or in the future. I was learning that developing leadership in others involves having work for them to do, showing faith by offering it, and offering support if they lack confidence. Many of those I asked to develop a workshop had never been called to make a presentation since their summer institutes. They were thrilled to be called and were enthusiastic presenters. All the series were well received, though attendance dwindled in the last series.

Whatever it takes: stepping up when others falter. In an adjoining county, we had promised one series of five workshops. Another colleague, who I'll call Sue, had agreed to coordinate it, but time was passing and it was now January 2003. No flyer had been sent out, no one had been called. I phoned Sue and told her, "Give me the dates you'll be available, tell me the place, give me the names of the people you want to be your presenters and I'll call them and arrange it. I'll make you a flyer. We must do this. We can't be seen as an organization that doesn't fulfill its promises. If no one comes, it won't be our fault." We did it. At the last minute, the county kicked in some stipends for participants. It was a successful series.

Whatever it takes: mastering budgets. The growth in our programs made tracking our site's current balance using the university's complicated accounting systems even more complex. I went to sessions led by Mike Mathis, the NWP financial guru, during an NWP Annual Meeting, and I spent time with the site's shared secretary and a university accountant making sure I understood our financial situation. I worked closely with the director on budgets and budget reporting. I reassured her that we had the resources to carry out our plans.

Whatever it takes: reflecting respect. I had been inspired and nurtured as a leader by our Writing Project site director. She had led my first summer institute in 1990, as I entered my fourth year as a teacher: she provided the experience of a class led quietly and gently, the experience of having my opinions welcomed and respected, the experience of presenting to other teachers. Later she recommended me to our state Center for Professional Development as an effective presenter of writing workshops, and in 1995 she asked me to take a leadership role and co-direct the Summer Institute. In the last few years she had promoted me to others as her right-hand man and a wonderful teacher. For over twenty years she had been the West Virginia Writing Project. While we did not always see eye to eye on how to grow our new site, I afforded her respect while promoting my point of view about the importance of continued growth and innovation.

### **Losing Momentum**

In our new site's third year, our programs seemed to cool. We had developed a leadership team that met regularly and came up with wonderful ideas. Increasingly, I

found myself in a difficult position. Our director hesitated to take on additional new projects. Our current level of activity was already greater than the previous site had managed—we were offering a couple of workshop series, had an annual continuity writing retreat, and were holding regular leadership team meetings. I struggled with taking care to nurture the ideas offered by leadership team members while also trying to be supportive of our director, whose approval we needed to implement them.

After announcing her upcoming retirement in late 2003, the director stayed on another year. She had trouble finding a colleague willing to direct the site and decided to stay rather than risk losing university support for our site if she withdrew without a new director. In 2005, like many sites experiencing leadership transitions, we still didn't have a new director even after several recruitment attempts. Meanwhile, our leadership team faltered, our inservice programs seemed to lose energy, and attendance was down. To me, the transition seemed to drag on.

In preparation for the transition, we applied to attend the 2005 NWP Directors Retreat. The retreat would give us the opportunity to plan a new direction. I'd been excited about that. Without a new director we might have to cancel. No one at our small campus could take on the role of director. Our site might have to become a satellite of the Marshall University Writing Project, a site that was already supporting one satellite. I was not invited to the table with the dean to discuss plans. Should I be exploring a way to direct the project myself, I wondered? My role as co-director had been almost that of an acting director, yet when it came to interfacing with university administrators, I had no influence.

## **Collaborating to Sustain Our Site**

Thankfully, the dean of the education department found a solution. I learned that a new doctoral student, Barbara Holmes, who had attended our 2003 summer institute while teaching at a nearby university, had accepted the position of director of the Central West Virginia Writing Project. She transitioned in during the fall semester and became director in January 2006. Barbara and I attended the NWP Directors Retreat in summer 2005 and have been working together ever since to build a more vital and dynamic Writing Project site. She moved quickly to renew or build partnerships in three counties, immediately grasped the need to deliver inservice, created meaningful jobs for teacher-consultants, and has demonstrated decisive leadership.

Today the Central West Virginia Writing Project's future is bright. Leadership is shared between a director and co-director who are both passionate about developing leadership throughout the organization. When Barbara first took the reigns, the number of hours I put into the site's work grew once again. I helped her get acclimated to the nuances of running a Writing Project site—from understanding the budget to learning insider language. Gradually she relieved me of tasks such as budgeting, which are not usually expected of a teacher co-director. Together, we have invited many potential teacher-leaders to take on responsibilities for our site. Barbara has taken bold steps by simply asking invitational summer institute fellows to lead or co-lead workshop series, write newsletters, and facilitate continuity programs the year following their summer institutes. While some have faltered or had family matters intervene, a few effective site leaders have emerged.

For seven years I have been willing to do whatever it takes to build a successful Writing Project site—a site that would be a beacon for teachers in central West Virginia. I have done so in a supporting role, as a co-director. At times it took bold leadership, at other times patience. A change in leadership added needed fuel to the fire, and a welcome stability. In the last year or so, with others adding strength to our site, I've been able to put energy into work I was tapped to do at the national level for NWP's Rural Sites Network. I still co-direct our summer Institute and sometimes lead workshop series, but now even if my flame went out, the fire would keep burning.

## **About the National Writing Project**

The *National Writing Project (NWP)* is a nationwide network of educators working together to improve the teaching of writing in the nation's schools and in other settings. NWP provides high-quality professional development programs to teachers in a variety of disciplines and at all levels, from early childhood through university. Through its network of more than 200 university-based sites located in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, NWP develops the leadership, programs and research needed for teachers to help students become successful writers and learners. Visit [www.nwp.org](http://www.nwp.org) to learn more.