Leading with Intention

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You are joining a conversation among thousands of members of the Michigan Reading Association and the National Writing Projects of Michigan. This book grew out of a simple question posed by a beleaguered teacher frustrated by the multiple demands of the current school reform climate.

“Just tell me. What’s the best way to teach writing?”

We all know it’s not a simple answer. More and more, our teaching lives are punctuated by the tension behind this question. We look at the tension as a challenge and as a creative resource. As the teacher writers for this collection discussed each others’ writing and the links between their work, they came back to the section from Renee Webster’s chapter that identified the critical goal of students “writing with their own intentions.” In this time of tension, these writers responded with stories about teaching with their own intentions.

No matter what district-wide writing initiative was in place—Four Blocks, Six Traits, Lucy Calkins, John Collins, or Barry Lane—the determining factor for these teachers’ success was for them to teach with their own intentions as they adapted, modified and appropriated the broader conversation into their practice. Intentional teaching in tension with other district demands proved to be generative for each teacher as they implemented purposeful instruction.

Intentional teaching of writing puts student work at the center of our thinking about teaching. We are not simply offering stories of best practice. We want to push our conversation on teaching to be data-driven, in the best sense of the word. We want to put student writing (and lots of it) at the heart of how we grow as a community of teachers. We want to put the data in tension with our beliefs and assumptions about the teaching of writing. We want it to illuminate our teaching; to surprise us with challenges and revelations. We want this creative tension to energize the teaching of writing. To this end, you will see student work at the heart of each chapter in the book.

These teachers intentionally center their teaching on the reciprocal relationship of reading and writing. Like the larger collaboration between the National Writing Projects of Michigan and
the Michigan Reading Association, these teachers capitalize upon the dynamic and complementary tension between these two meaning making activities to develop instruction that makes a difference in the lives of the student writers with whom they work.

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As teacher leaders in MRA and NWPM, our best response to these tensions is to intentionally start a conversation. Throughout this collection, you’ll find teachers posing questions and uncovering conversations like these.

Bev Matulis writes, “Sentence fluency is an essential writing skill, but it is very difficult to teach in a way that transfers into student writing.”

Renee Webster describes how, “I began to look at my teaching of writing with entirely new eyes.”

Jan Sabin initiates an ongoing inquiry conversation. “I have spent the past decade trying to come to terms with how to guide second graders into understanding the core democratic values of justice and equality while encouraging them to take a stand for these concepts and write down what they believe.”

Each writer is sharing part of a conversation that began with a question about the teaching of writing. This book will give you and your colleagues a chance to participate in this conversation by:

1. Reading teacher stories about best practices in the teaching of writing.
2. Examining student work that emerged from the classroom.
3. Understanding how this work took place in a range of district literacy initiatives including 6+1 Traits, Collins Writing Program, Four Blocks, Lucy Calkins, Barry Lane and many others.
4. Exploring resources suggested by the teacher-writer.
5. Discussing with colleagues your reactions, questions and potential applications to your schools.
6. Developing your own individual, department, school/district wide inquiries into the teaching of writing.

This book (like others) will expose you to best practices in the teaching of writing. However, our main purpose is to prompt an ongoing professional learning community that develops its own questions about writing, its own best practices, its own student work and its own beliefs about the teaching of writing. As these professional learning communities emerge, we also hope to link you to the larger networks of professional learning found in the National Writing Projects of Michigan and the Michigan Reading Association.

We have invited educators from kindergarten to eighth grade across the state of Michigan to share their stories of best practice. These stories demonstrate the power of intentional teach-
ing in the midst of host of competing tensions in districts across the state. Kathleen Reddy-Butkovich, with Plymouth Canton Public Schools, reveals how teachers across her district are looking at student work and becoming better teachers of writing. Renee Webster, an early elementary teacher from Perry shares practices from an effective writing workshop influenced by Lucy Calkins. Jan Lamborne describes how her first grade writing conferences adapted the language of Six plus One Traits. Marsha Page explains how she uses portfolios with her first graders in Marquette. Jan Sabin’s second graders learn from her how to take a stand in their writing. Sandy Bosnall, also influenced by Calkins’ work with genre, is a third grade teacher in the Upper Peninsula who demonstrates her students’ learning in non-fiction reading and writing. Bev Matulis, a National Board Certified fifth grade teacher in Bay City, discusses her students’ efforts in sentence combining. Kari Scheidel, at Woodview in Belding, helped boost her fifth graders achievement in writing for social studies, amidst two district initiatives in John Collins and in Six plus One Traits. Toby Kahn-Loftus, a former sixth grade Language Arts and Social Studies teacher for Detroit Public Schools, explains how she helps her students write for multiple purposes and audiences. Kim Bolt, a seventh grade teacher at in Kentwood, details her efforts in helping students work on self-assessment in her Six plus One Traits classroom. Finally, Paula Diedrich, an eighth grade teacher in the Upper Peninsula, describes how her students work with voice.

These teachers work in a variety of settings from rural to urban and at a range of grade levels. What they have in common is a deep understanding of the reading writing connection and the value of studying student writers and their work. They are successful writing teachers who have been a part of vibrant and intersecting professional learning networks. Their intentions drive their practice, enable them to harness the creative tensions in their districts, and raise student achievement in writing.

We imagine that you are reading this book with some colleagues. As you proceed with reading, we suggest that you discuss each teacher chapter one at a time. Here are some suggestions for beginning.

1. As the book opens we introduce Kathleen’s initiative with Plymouth-Canton’s district-wide look at student work. The scale of this project suggests new and innovative purposes for looking at student writing. It reveals the power of teacher discussion using student work, making broad discoveries about student writing and teaching practice. We hope you start with Kathleen’s piece. Your discussion about this opening chapter will lead you to focus on other stories of teacher practice in writing.

2. Consider this first story of best practice as you select another chapter for your extended discussion on teacher practice. Look for a chapter that addresses a particular question about the teaching of writing that your department, school or district might have.
3. Articulate and wrestle with questions you might have about the practice. Examine the student work, taking time to notice what seems to be going on in the writing, speculating about the intentions of the writer and describing what you might do next with the writer. This way of looking at student work is called the Collaborative Assessment Protocol as mentioned by Kathleen. The National Writing Projects of Michigan have found this protocol to be particularly useful as we think about writing. This reflection leads to answers for larger questions looming in the minds of teachers.

4. After you’ve discussed each chapter, try to identify one area that interests you in terms of teaching writing. The teachers have provided their best resources for supporting the type of best practice that emerged in their classrooms. Use this to start your own reading group. Start to try out these practices. Collect your own student work that demonstrates your attempts to teach writing. Conduct Collaborative Assessment Conferences with your colleagues based on the work in your classrooms.

5. Talk about how teacher decision-making about best practice emerges within a district-wide approach to writing. Use these practices and your discussion to reflect upon current or potential writing plans for your district.

6. Consider whether your practice aligns with writing process and genre in the Michigan Grade Level Content Expectations. Keep track of how adapting any of these best practices is leading to school-wide evidence of successful on-demand writing for large-scale assessments.

This is the type of professional learning that can make a difference. Starting a conversation like this is the best response to “what’s the best way to teach writing?” We hope to provoke you and your colleagues to develop your own intentions for the teaching of writing and to make a difference in the life of your schools and most importantly in the lives of your students.