Congressional Briefing September 21, 2009: Remarks by Sharon J. Washington

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The National Writing Project is pleased to be here with such distinguished colleagues to add to this important conversation.

As you may know, the National Writing Project is a professional development network for teachers, anchored at more than 200 colleges and universities across all 50 states, Washington, DC, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Across the country, we recruit and prepare 3,000 new teacher-leaders annually at intensive four-week summer institutes, and our network provides professional development to an additional 100,000 teachers through a range of program offerings throughout the year.

Because of the profound impact of technology on writing and publishing across all media, the NWP established an early focus on digital media and learning. For more than 15 years, NWP teachers have reimagined, reformulated, and refined their teaching practices to adapt the teaching of writing to the digital age and to translate their work into meaningful professional development for their colleagues. As new media, microblogging, and social networking enter students’ lives, NWP teachers strive to harness technology to help all young learners become writers and creators of content.

Initially, one big challenge for teachers and students was simply access to computers. Today, most schools and many classrooms across the country have some connectivity and basic equipment because of the E-Rate and other investments. However, there is a wide range of what teachers and students do with the technology that is available, and what they do may or may not support the most powerful student learning.

That is why we at the National Writing Project believe that the most significant work ahead for educators is not in basic training related to hardware and software, but rather is in providing deep and sustained professional development that will allow the 7.2 million educators in the United States to reenvision their teaching for the 21st century.

Web 2.0, or participatory media, is not merely a more powerful textbook. Participatory media is the way we write, read, do research, and engage in civic life. Teachers are coming to understand that it is a way to do the work of teaching and learning, as well as an outcome that we must prepare students for.

Let’s consider the challenges that teachers face in reenvisioning their teaching and look at why professional development is critical.
First, we want all our young people to use technology responsibly and use technology as producers and writers, as readers, as researchers, and as citizens. For their teachers, this means knowing how to instruct them in reading, writing, and thinking across disciplines, and in using those skills to participate online in networked environments.

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Picture a group of fourth grade students new to this country conducting research on science topics, writing scripts, and producing podcasts as a way to demonstrate and expand their content knowledge to a real audience through the Internet. For example, in this fourth grade classroom in Philadelphia, English language learners work on their mastery of academic English because they need to get it right for their broadcasts. As one said “I like podcasting, because it can go on the Internet and I feel like I’m a star. People can learn something from it and I become even braver.”

Second, we know that today’s world continues to be transformed daily by technology. This world demands that every teacher, across grades and content areas, know how to bring together rich content, literacy skills specific to that content, and the many new media tools available to enhance learning.

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For this reason, the National Writing Project strongly supports policies that require school districts to make significant investments in professional development and in the time and space for teachers and administrators to work together to plan for significant improvements in the educational experience of young people.

Of course, we still need to make investments in infrastructure, but those investments must be accompanied by professional learning. The investments in professional learning need to be integrated into a wide range of academic and school improvement programs, so that teachers across the curriculum are supported to rethink their work with a view to the impacts of technology.

So what is the nature of high-quality professional development in our digital world? As I mentioned earlier, the National Writing Project supports teachers in improving their classroom practice. We also learn from teachers, and here are four things we know after 35 years:

1. Professional development needs to be content-rich and discipline-specific so that science, history, mathematics, and English teachers use the knowledge of their discipline in these new digital environments.
2. New media practices are new. Educators need time to participate in new media as learners themselves. This base of experience will allow them to invent learning applications that are right for their students and for local learning goals.

3. When teachers and administrators become part of professional learning communities, powerful knowledge about teaching and learning is generated. This coming together with other educators to inquire about practice and to learn from each other is one of the cornerstone elements of the writing project and one of the reasons we’ve been effective.

4. Teachers are ready to take up the challenges of incorporating new media into their teaching. Let’s invest in the spread of their most effective practices.

At the National Writing Project, we have examples from every corner of the country of what happens when teachers have access to high-quality professional development.

[Slide 4] Here we have first grade students in Perry, Michigan, using digital recorders to capture their own ideas and to record conversations of other first-graders. The first grade teacher in this classroom uses digital recorders to capture the smart thinking of her students. In her words, she replays the recordings to “show our young students in what ways they were so smart” as they discuss books they have read. It was also in this class that students created a documentary for graduating kindergartners on what first grade was like.

[Slide 5] Fourth grade students in Elk Grove, California, use multimedia tools to enhance standards-based history lessons and then conference about their learning with historians and community elders through the Internet. One of their teachers says that “the students are more motivated, knowing they are able to use the computer.”

[Slide 6] Now think even more globally about middle and high school students who post blogs from their classrooms to other students across the world. They write on a variety of subjects that encourage dialogue, collaboration, and civic action while still promoting the academic learning that is central to their curriculum.

[Slide 7] Last fall at this time, more than 6,500 students from more than 200 school districts posted persuasive essays as part of an online writing and publishing project, Letters to the Next
President: Writing Our Future, cosponsored by Google and the National Writing Project. We invited young people to write about the issues and concerns they felt were central to their future, issues they hoped our next president would act on. Teachers and mentors guided students through the process of writing a persuasive letter or essay to the presidential candidates. Most of these essays are still posted online for teachers and students to use in a variety of lessons.

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Currently, NWP is engaged in a program called Digital Is, supported in part by our grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The goal is to create and disseminate resources and learning opportunities for teachers, centered on effective practices for teaching writing and new media literacies across the curriculum. Needless to say, the goal is also to extend the impact of quality professional development for all teachers—because teachers are the key, and the need for professional development is urgent at this moment.

After having come this far, we do not want to promote a new digital divide for students—one in which only some students have access to high-quality learning experiences. We want to prepare all students to engage fully in an interconnected digital world.