

How do writing project sites continue to attract and engage hard-working teachers in cocreating professional development throughout their careers? How do they sustain a presence in their local service areas, adapting to the interests of successive generations of teachers while still maintaining a sense of organizational mission? This third set in the NWP at Work monograph series focuses on the varied approaches local NWP sites take to “continuity.” Each monograph offers a window into the design and structure of opportunities that provide an intellectual home for writing project teacher-consultants who lead the work at each of the nearly 200 local sites around the country.

The first two sets in the NWP at Work series highlight two of the three components of the NWP model: the summer institute and site-sponsored inservice programming in schools and districts. The present set offers illustrations of the third component: continuity. Continuity, essentially, consists of those practices that nurture ongoing professional development and provide an indispensable source for sustained leadership development at local sites. The invitational summer institute identifies, recruits, and invites teachers into the culture, offering opportunities for leadership of the site. Inservice programs disseminate learnings about the teaching of writing. And it is through continuity that each site invests over time in the continued learning of its community of teacher-consultants.

Continuity, as the name implies, extends and deepens the cultural values enacted in the invitational summer institute: learning is ongoing, and it is socially and collaboratively constructed. At NWP sites, continuity goes beyond follow-up to the summer institute and constitutes the programming that sustains the professional community of the site and builds its leadership. Sites rely on teacher-consultants and university colleagues to collaborate and reinforce the partnership that is the backbone of the site; and continuity programs allow each site to grow and respond to changing educational landscapes. Continuity, according to Sheridan Blau, director of the South Coast Writing Project, is “where knowledge is as much produced as consumed.”

Continuity to Support Continued Learning

The kinds of programs sites engage in as continuity are wide-ranging and varied in intensity, drawing on local interests and needs. Such programs can include writing retreats, teacher research initiatives, and study groups on issues of concern in the service area, to name a few. While aspects of continuity described in this series involve long-range programming, teacher-consultants at writing project sites also value the less-formal and more-social occasions for learning. These might include book groups, dine-and-discuss gatherings, yearly reunion dinners, and ongoing listserv discussions that keep them involved and connected. An effective approach to continuity supports the dynamic growth of teacher-consultant knowledge by offering teachers access to colleagues and intellectual engagement in the midst of what can be the isolated act of teaching. It is, as one teacher in Oklahoma notes, a place where “you keep seeing people grow.”

Continuity to Develop and Support Leadership

The monographs in this set provide a look at slices of the professional communities at a number of writing project sites. Taken together, these stories from site leaders offer a theory of action about leadership that has attracted—and continues to attract—teacher-leaders. Successful sites have found ways to respond to shifting educational priorities while preserving their core values. Not an easy task in many cases.

It will be apparent from this set of monographs that continuity is firmly linked to sustainability, so that the challenge of preparing for both normal and unanticipated site leadership transitions might be met. Continuity programs vary in form and purpose, yet they all share the goal of supporting the continued learning of teacher-consultants. This focus on learning encourages sites to take an inquiry stance toward their work: to devise new structures that support diverse and democratic leadership; to reassess the goals and mission of the site through visioning and strategic planning; to examine ideas about literacy occasioned by new technologies; and to inform thoughtful, sustained, and relevant professional development in schools.

Local Sites/National Network

Finally, the NWP itself, over its nearly 35-year history, sponsors an array of initiatives, subnetworks, and events that support continuity at local sites. These cross-site exchanges provide opportunities for teacher-leaders and directors to extend their work by identifying new resources and learning from other sites. Local continuity programs then become a way for site leaders who participate in national programs and initiatives to involve colleagues in sharing new resources and learning throughout the local community.

So the explanation for the sustainability of NWP sites over time is this notion of continuity, the means by which teachers make the local site their intellectual home and a place of continual learning. Writing project sites are like solidly built houses: they endure because they have solid foundations and adhere to a set of principles that value the collaboratively constructed knowledge of teachers from preschool through university.

With this volume of NWP at Work we invite directors, teacher-consultants, school administrators, and all education stakeholders to explore the concepts and practices of the National Writing Project's continuity programs. These programs build leadership, offer ongoing professional development that is timely and responsive to local contexts, and provide a highly effective means of sustaining a community to support current and future teacher-leaders.

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