WHAT IS THE NWP’S PHILOSOPHY OF DIFFERENTIATION?

We could think about differentiated curriculum approaches and that is a piece that many people want to think more about. But that can’t replace the decisionmaking of a very strong teacher being able to make something work with those very particular young people that are in his or her class. For the National Writing Project, it’s about investing in teachers. There’s something about understanding writing from the inside because you’re doing it yourself that...
helps you see what the task of writing is, that helps you figure out how, in fact, you can support and scaffold different kinds of students to do this very complex and multi-dimensional task.

We also think it helps to have a supportive network of colleagues who think about your teaching and how you can reach all students. There are so many lovely and very powerful ideas to consider about our work as teachers. It’s everything from managing time to managing space. That’s another important piece around differentiation. How can you really make classrooms that work for a broad range of kids? How can you make classrooms work as an environment? How can you make classrooms work in terms of student grouping and activities?

If we can harness that teacher knowledge and combine it with teachers’ own experience of being writers and learners themselves, we can get at the core of what it means to differentiate.

It seems as though NWP is built around differentiation at the teacher level with the idea of filtering down to the students.

We are built around differentiation at the level of the teacher. We think that is one of the ways that teachers learn how to differentiate in their classrooms. That’s the direct relationship we always hope that we can create and one that

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**EMPOWERING English-Language Learners to Write**

LISA UMMEL-INGRAM, a 5th grade teacher in Oklahoma City, attended her first National Writing Project summer institute in 1998 as a fairly new, second-career elementary school teacher. “I was searching for a way to immerse my English-language learners in the world of words,” she says. In NWP, she found a supportive network of colleagues “where you often get an idea for a writing assignment, a tool to take back to the classroom to get at a student’s life experience.”

In an essay posted on NWP’s Web site, Ummel-Ingram shares a lesson in which she used personal narrative to motivate 3rd grade dual-language immersion students to write. After reading Jamie Lee Curtis’ *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born* to her students, Ummel-Ingram asked them to find out about the day or night they were born. Later in small groups, the students shared their stories, and she instructed them on how to write, storyboard, and illustrate their narratives.

What followed was “magic,” according to Ummel-Ingram, who is now a leadership team member of NWP’s New Teacher Institute and co-director of NWP’s local site at Oklahoma State University. Investigating their birth stories with their families ultimately provided the students with powerful narratives for their storybooks. And they embraced the opportunity to present their nonverbal strengths with the leveling element of art. By hearing “their voices echo back their own stories,” explains Ummel-Ingram, they delighted in becoming authors.

The experience empowered the students, she says. And they grew more comfortable and willing to express themselves as speakers, readers, and writers of English. “The genuine value each student felt as he wrote, published, and read his book transformed this class of English-language learners,” writes Ummel-Ingram.

—Elizabeth Rich
creates a strong learning environment for teachers.

We want teachers to analyze that writing experience and ask: What are some elements that made this work for me as a learner? When I look at my classroom, what questions does that raise for me? And it’s going to be different for different teachers. The experience of really having an adaptive and focused learning environment for you as an individual, which was also designed for this other person next to you who’s very different, and it’s working for you both—seeing that model in action and having it work is part of the living example that teachers can take straight back to their classrooms. It’s one that they’ve experienced for themselves.

What is it about writing, particularly in relation to differentiation, that accesses issues that can be hard for a teacher to address otherwise?

Writing is one way that all of us can make our thinking visible. From the point of the teacher, when you can collect the writing from all of your students, you get a window into their thinking which is almost unmatched.

In a given day in the classroom, you may actually not hear a response from any student at every minute but when you can collect some writing from each student and take it home and take time with it, you can really see the thinking and the learning and the understanding behind it. You have such a road map of where you have to go with each individual student. Each student’s piece of writing offers a kind of a private moment of communication with the teacher, which is a great thing for a student to have, too.

In connection to differentiation, it doesn’t mean you’re pleased with everything you read. It does mean you get to see it and that’s huge.

The other thing that is important, that’s interesting about writing, is that it’s such a complex task. It is something that no one can do for you. You have to wrestle with the page. You have to get it down. You can’t do that with almost anything else. If you say something, you have only the memory of that conversation but to really come back and revisit your ideas—it’s a gift that writing gives the writer and it’s also a gift for the teacher. There’s so much at school where you can sit and absorb, but writing is the act, the moment of creation.

Many teachers feel empowered by this program. Why?

If we really want to engage our very smartest teachers and if we want our very most committed and smartest people to be teachers, we need to give them a learning environment that excites them intellectually and engages them as leaders in the same way that we would for any other profession. If you’re treated like a leader, you start to feel like a leader and then you start to take responsibility for leadership.

If we have that model of a highly engaged and professional teacher in mind, what’s the kind of professional development that honors that really smart and very committed person? How do we build professional development that really activates their leadership, that really engages them in contributing to solutions?

Especially in the theme of differentiation, teachers can’t wait for someone else to build knowledge for them. We have to work together to do this. ■


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