Foreword

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Home from college in the summer of 1997, I worked on the outside maintenance crew of Medicine Lodge High School, the school from which I had graduated a year earlier. Painting, painting, cleaning, organizing, and painting my way through the hot Kansas days wasn’t exactly my idea of a good time. Wrapped up in my own nineteen-year-old world, I was oblivious to a magical event happening 325 miles to my southeast in Fayetteville, Arkansas—the first annual Invitational Summer Institute of the Northwest Arkansas Writing Project (NWAWP). Housed and thoroughly supported by the University of Arkansas’ College of Education and Health Professions, NWAWP began to change the teaching of writing in Northwest Arkansas that year. For twelve teachers that first summer, what has been termed a “transformation” (Caswell, 2007; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Whitney, 2008), started.

A few years after working on the outside of a school, I snagged a teaching job on the inside of Washburn Rural High School in Topeka, Kansas and started trying to teach writing in my English classroom. It didn’t take me long to realize that writing and teaching writing were two completely different tasks. And it was one of those life-altering—transformational—moments when Dr. Todd Goodson invited me to apply to his first ISI at the
Flint Hills Writing Project. It was there, in the sub-zero temperatures of Bluemont Hall, I found a home with the National Writing Project. It was there that just about every practice in my own teaching of writing was challenged. It was there I realized that to become a writing teacher, I needed to first become a writer. I was not alone.

I remember well that group of NWP fellows, writing teachers from around the rural northeast and north central parts of Kansas. Three college teachers, two other high school teachers, three middle school teachers, and three elementary teachers created a tipping point of motivation for me, a “moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point” (Gladwell, 2000, p. 12). Emily Pauly had just completed her second year of teaching middle school English, while Roger Caswell had just completed his 25th year. The range of backgrounds in the classroom helped make the experience for me. The experience made the experience too. Existing as writers and teachers of writing, we grew and developed and learned in ways only possible when a group coexists for an extended period of time together—four full days per week for five weeks. Lieberman (2005) referred to the National Writing Project as a “supportive professional community,” and I had found mine.

I returned to my classroom that August with quite honestly a different idea of what it meant to be a teacher, let alone different ideas about how I would teach writing. More than any one tangible activity or approach in the classroom (there were several), I began to identify as a writer in my own professional and personal lives and began sharing my newfound identity with my students. Whether it was that first article that was published or the experience of a rejection letter, I was different because of the National Writing Project, and my students were too. And just as I had been accepted into and flourished in a supportive community, I invited my students into a new one in room 169.

Maybe my experience with the Flint Hills Writing Project—specifically the six free hours of graduate credit—could be viewed as a gateway drug for me. Those first six hours of my Master’s degree morphed into the pursuit and completion of a Ph.D. and now find me in my fourth year as Assistant Professor, on the other side of giving out hours. The slippery slope argument holds true for me.

The constant variable in my career since the summer of 2002 is my tie to and passion for the National Writing Project. When I interviewed at the University of Arkansas, I remember confessing to founding director Dr. Sam Totten, “I am a writing project person.” I am. I served as Co-Director of Youth Programs at the site in Manhattan while studying under Good-
son. I began serving on the NWAWP Steering Committee before even living in Fayetteville and have since continued to seek immersion in the work, people and pride of the site here, serving first as Interim then Associate and now Director of the site. The terrific responsibility and honor is not lost on me.

And while this book isn’t about the National Writing Project, any worthy conversation of writing teachers’ experiences and development either directly or indirectly tie back to what was started by Jim Gray in a single classroom in 1974 in Berkeley, California. Lieberman (2005) suggests NWP is “arguably the most successful K–12 professional development project ever in the United States” (p. 187). As its stated mission on the project’s website (www.nwp.org), “the National Writing Project focuses the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of our nation’s educators on sustained efforts to improve writing and learning for all learners.” At the core of the belief system are two simple statements: the best teachers of teachers are teachers and the best teachers of writing are writers. While difficult to say quickly, everything that happens involved with the NWP traces back to those two ideas.

While it started as one site in California which quickly spread to other areas of the state and other states through grant money provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Carnegie Corporation, the NWP today is a national network of university-based sites serving all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and U.S. Virgin Islands. In 1991, the Department of Education began funding the writing project, the only federal grant solely dedicated to writing instruction. The infrastructure of the national network provides support and programming which allows each individual site to grow and develop over time.

NWP boasts several statistics worth noting as they help place the work in the educational context of American education. In a survey of teachers who participated in National Writing Project inservices or programs over seven years, Inverness Research found that 97% believe it is better professional development than they have experienced prior (John, M. S., 2008). When teachers attend the intensive ISI, 98% ultimately retire from education, most of them from the classroom. Nationally, 46% of teachers leave the profession in their first five years. Teachers are at the center of the work.

At one point, each individual site had to apply for funding through the national network. In 1997, Dr. Samuel Totten, my predecessor, did just that and founded the Northwest Arkansas Writing Project. Since its inception, NWAWP has received federal funding for $410,000 and received or administered, through matching funds from the university, foundations, and
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public school partners, an amount totaling nearly $750,000 (gross of 1.16 million dollars). For a relatively small grant ($46,000 in 2010, for example), these numbers help to demonstrate the economic effect a writing project site can have in a region. Of course, the numbers, in this case, only tell a portion of the story. Impact is felt in many other ways too.

The work of any site centers around the Invitational Summer Institute, and the ISI at NWAWP could only be described as rigorous and intense, one that separates great teachers from good teachers. While going over the day to day details of such an experience might be interesting, it is those teachers who choose to take on the challenge who have made NWAWP what it is today. These people have existed within the supportive professional community, and their teaching lives have been altered by that experience.

When I think of writing project people, I have to think of people like Scott Sullivan. In 2005, Scott was just about ready to tell public education “goodbye,” in not so many words, but he let a colleague talk him into participating in the summer institute. I can speak for others at the site when I say that I am sure glad his colleague succeeded. Scott has been a staunch advocate for NWAWP and the NWP ideals both in his work at the site—presently the Co-Director of Continuity—and through his work as a Teacher Leader in the Bentonville Public Schools.

I think of other people, too. Suki Highers, one of our newly minted 2009 Teacher Consultants, is singlehandedly redefining what it means to be “on fire” about the writing project. Ms. Highers is a high school social studies and sociology teacher in Fayetteville, and she has already attended a national NWP meeting, started working as web editor for our new website, and generally immersed herself in the work here. I cannot count how many times I’ve encountered her telling her writing project story, one no less transformational than the others.

It was the work of this site and the supportive professional community that lured Deborah Stankevich in the summer of 2005 and her experiences here that have provided the springboard for her to connect with that national network and provide us all with what I believe is an important collection of essays. Before I met her, I encountered her through my role as coordinator of English education in the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program at the University of Arkansas. Specifically and maybe somewhat appropriately, I met Deborah through a writing exercise I have my new MAT students complete each summer. As I attempted to understand my new students, we wrote together to a prompt asking, “What are the reasons you are set to become an English teacher?” Tara Griner volunteered to read first,
and as she walked to the author’s chair in the front of the room, I noticed an air of confidence about her. She sat and began to read a story about her high school English teacher, a lady by the name of Deborah Stankevich. She was the reason Tara believed she was sitting in front of me and the others. I am thankful for what Ms. Stankevich did to inspire Griner, a bright start now teaching at Washington Junior High School, Bentonville, Arkansas.

The power of that introduction was not lost on me and when, through my work with NWAWP, I encountered that name on a list of TCs, I immediately connected my student, Tara, with her high school English teacher. As this site and this national network continues to change and to enhance the teaching of writing, who better to learn from than the 18 different contributors to *Getting It in Writing*. They help put a face on the history of writing instruction as it is actually learned and practiced. You will read about trial and error, about transformation and supportive professional communities, and chances are, you will identify with all of the writing teachers as they creatively write their stories.

Just as I was invited to attend a site of the National Writing Project, I end this section with an invitation. Please join along and indulge yourself in the stories these teachers have experienced. Whether you are preparing to become a teacher or have been teaching for years and years, you will certainly find kindred spirits in the different authors represented here. With any luck at all, you will both learn from their mistakes and not be bound to repeat them and implement something they have found successful. Whether you are young or old, new or veteran or somewhere in between, I invite you to attend a site of the National Writing Project. Quite simply, it changed my life, and chances are it will change yours as well. In a February 2010 lecture at the University of Arkansas, NCTE President Carol Jago related her story about attending the first ISI at UCLA in 1975. “It changed my life.”

**References**


