Coach John Wooden once said, “It’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.” These humbling words set the tone for my professional development when I first became a teacher nine years ago. Since then, I have set goals that include a range of professional development activities and structured continuing education opportunities that have fostered my growth. Reflecting upon the kinds of professional development that have made a difference in my teaching life, I learned that they are the ones that have made me a better teacher of writing, discover innovative ways to adapt district-mandated curriculum and address the needs of all my students, and inspired me to continue the work that I love.

One of the biggest challenges I faced four years ago as a fairly new teacher was working English Learners who were either born in the United States or had been attending U.S. schools for several years but were placed in English as a Second Language classes. My middle school students had conversational proficiency in English but still did not have mastery of the academic language that school demanded. To foster their overall English language development, I needed to build on my repertoire of strategies and resources designed to better enhance their reading and written language skills. I wanted to know; “How can I teach students to see the vital interrelationships among listening, speaking, reading, and writing? How do I use students’ writing as a process and a product to help them develop as readers and conversationalists? How can I facilitate positive social interaction where students develop strong language and literacy skills?”

The answers to these questions among many lied in The Los Angeles Writing Project (LAWP) at California State University Los Angeles. LAWP is affiliated with the National Writing Project and granted me a fellowship to participate in a four-week long summer institute with a select group of kindergarten through college teachers and learn about successful approaches to reading and writing. The goals of this organization is to improve student writing and learning, extend the uses of writing in across the content areas, provide an effective professional development model of “teachers teaching other teachers”, and recognize, commemorate, and increase the professional role of successful classroom teachers in the Los Angeles area. In accepting the fellowship, I knew that my teaching would forever be changed. I often wondered, “What is that teacher doing in her classroom that I am not doing?” Because this professional development used the model of “teachers teaching other teachers”, each day I had first-hand experiences of a reading or writing lesson presented by my fellow teachers or a guest speaker who was either a former Fellow, a distinguished professor or writer. An example of a lesson is one titled “Writing as Conversation”, presented by a Fellow who was a college English Instructor. She opened her lesson presentation with this quote, “Experienced writing instructors have long recognized that writing well means entering into conversation with others. Academic writing in particular calls upon writers not simply to express their own ideas, but to do so as a response to what others have said” (Graff & Birkenstein). This lesson was a reminder to students that academic writing is a dialogue between themselves and other writers. Having this dialogue with the writer is what my students struggled to do when writing a response to literature. In her lesson, the Fellow demonstrated the use of a t-chart where students recorded what the author states in the text and their responses to those statements – whether they agree, disagree, have mixed feelings, or of “two minds” about the topic. I found this t-chart effective in various units where the culminating task was for students to write a recurring theme essay, research report, and persuasive brochure. To prevent plagiarism and assess students’ abilities to understand the textual evidence they used to support their claims, I had students copy the relevant and appropriate quotes from the text on the left side and their paraphrase and analysis on the right side of the t-chart. It essentially became their prewriting activity which they used to conference with me and a peer. Once they got confirmation that
their quotes, paraphrasing, and analyses were accurate, appropriate, thoughtful, and thorough, they began writing the draft of their essays. From that lesson that was initially created for college English students, I was able to easily adapt a useful tool to engage my middle school students in meaningful interaction with text that promoted their academic written language.

A lesson on “Disciplined Literacy”, presented by Sheridan Blau, the former director of the South Coast Writing Project, taught me how to deepen students’ level of thinking by teaching them to ask comprehension, analysis, evaluation, and reflection questions while they are reading text. I replicated the steps he demonstrated once I returned to my own classroom, and since that summer I have been able to teach students how to ask themselves and one another, “What does it say? What does it mean? What is its value? What does it have to do with me?” My students first began using these questions as a guide to annotating text. On the margin of their consumable textbooks or photocopies of a piece of text, they would answer these questions while reading and essentially form a commentary to use during discussion with their peers and in their essays. In one poetry lesson, I placed students in triads and had each group of three engage in reading and discussing the poem “Invisible Boundaries” by Ivette Alvarez. Because I gave each student a consumable copy of the poem, they were able to write their commentaries on it and underline lines in the poem that served as textual evidence. In one of the triads, two group members shared their written commentaries with the one who was having difficulty writing one, which showed me I was able to foster collaborative interaction and productive teamwork because due to his group members’ modeling, the struggling student was able to produce a commentary. As students shared their commentaries, they were exposed to multiple perspectives because each student brought unique prior knowledge, personal experiences, and cultural backgrounds; as a result, their interactive discussion about the poem was enriched, and it contributed to their deeper understandings. It served as a scaffolding strategy for the Response to Literature essay that students had to write at the end of the unit. This strategy developed students’ skills in writing and reading because they had to evaluate which textual evidence best supports each commentary. As I intended, students were engaged in meaningful conversation about culturally relevant literature in small groups and achieved higher-order thinking skills by their interpretations and analyses.

A former LAWP Fellow gave an introduction to Writers’ Workshop that provided me with tools to establish my own system for Writers’ Workshop to better instruct my English Learners whose needs were not fully being met by the district-mandated ESL curriculum. I knew that the program had its shortcomings in preparing my students for core English classes because they struggled once they exited the ESL program. They were challenged by the grade-level texts and the on-demand district writing assessments, especially if they were required to read independently and prompted to write a literary analysis. In her demonstration lesson, the former Fellow included examples of different writing lessons to teach in a writing workshop such as Procedures (good writing behaviors, how to be good listeners, good audience responses, etc), Writing Process (how to pre-write/draft/self-conference, how to participate in a peer-conference group, how to participate in a teacher conference, etc), and Authors Craft (different writing genres, engaging beginnings, sensory details, etc). After implementing Writers’ Workshop in my classroom, each student became a member of a community that supported all writers to succeed, which resulted in active engagement in writing and conversations about writing. Students experienced how listening and speaking promoted their reading and writing skills. I was able to adapt the district-mandated curriculum for English Learners by incorporating grade-level texts outside the required ESL program to use as models of good writing and weave in Writers’ Workshop in the program’s suggested pacing plan.

At the end of the four-week-long institute, I accomplished my goal of building my repertoire of instructional strategies by participating in 40 different lessons presented by my fellow teachers – to name a few others, “Descartes or Montaigne? Deductive vs. inductive Thinking”, “The Idea of the Opposite”, “Color Coding for Revision”, “The Soundtrack of My Life”, and “Overcoming Fear of Poetry”.

Becoming a Writing Project Fellow made me a more confident teacher of reading and writing, and it helped me realize my potential as a professional leader. It broadened my approaches and strategies for teaching the different genres and components of writing, for modifying district-mandated writing tasks to fit the needs of my English Learners, for preparing students for the state standardized writing assessment and writing section of the state’s English Language Development test, and more importantly, to develop a love for writing. To continue providing professional development where “teachers teach other teachers,” the Writing Project Fellows become Teacher Consultant after completing the summer institute. Since completing the summer institute, I have provided in-service training at school sites and at the LAWP Saturday Seminar Series at Cal State Los Angeles to help improve student writing and the teaching of writing at all grade levels.

About the Author:

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