New York City Writing Project’s New-Teacher Listserv

By Felicia George, Debi Freeman, and Joe Bellacero

What is the resource?
For three years, through the auspices of Lehman College, The New York City Writing Project (NYCWP) operated a New-Teacher Listserv. In its first year, eleven new teachers were selected to participate in the project. They came from those schools where the two teacher-consultants on the NTI Leadership Team work full time to support teachers. (The NYCWP has a total of seventeen teacher-consultants performing this support work.)

Conversations on the listserv were completely private for participants, who included the new teachers, teacher-consultant facilitators, the NTI site coordinator, and the NTI thinking partner. In its second year, thanks to a successful grant written by site teacher-consultants, the listserv added an additional three teacher-consultants along with the new teachers in their schools.

What is our rationale for using this resource?
Our goals are to

- explore the potential of the listserv as a means of sustaining a viable interschool community of new teachers
- identify how a facilitated support group influences teacher development
- provide new teachers the opportunity to set the agenda for their own professional development
- identify the strategies and approaches that are most effective in working with new teachers, for use in planning future professional development services.

How did we use the resource?
The New Teacher Listserv was built around our traditional inservice model: providing the services of an on-site consultant and offering graduate seminars and courses. The listserv
provided an occasion to join a community of peers through online conversation facilitated by veteran teacher-consultants with input from the NTI site coordinator.

**What does this resource represent about our site’s work?**

The New York City Writing Project has an extremely viable listserv for its members. The idea of building community for new teachers, in one of the largest and most complex school districts in the country, is a direct outgrowth of the success of that model. The parent listserv is supported by the many opportunities that New York’s teacher-consultants have to meet with each other. So too, the new teachers’ listserv is supported by structured opportunities to meet and work with each other through contact at formal and informal get-togethers, seminars, and courses.

The New-Teacher Initiative represented a significant shift in the focus of the work. Over the course of the project, a way of moderating the listserv evolved. The teacher-consultant facilitators learned that the same kind of careful listening that was a feature of the work with experienced teachers also benefited the new teachers.

Prior to this initiative, NYCWP’s model included on-site support and seminars and courses, primarily for experienced teachers. As a result of the initiative, on-site teacher-consultants in New York City schools also identify new teachers with whom to work.

**What was the impact on the new teachers?**

A discussion of the impact on the new teachers is embedded in Joe Bellacero’s article “Keep On Keeping On: A Look at Three Years of the New-Teacher Initiative,” published in the Spring 2005 New York City Writing Project Journal. Joe says,

> In creating the NYCWP’s proposal to the National Writing Project’s New-Teacher Initiative, we were determined that listening would be our first priority. Beginning with one of the fundamental beliefs of the Writing Project, that teachers learn best from other teachers, Debi Freeman,
Felicia George, and I discussed ways in which we could help the new teachers in the program learn from each other.

This was also a case of making a virtue out of necessity as none of us could claim any special expertise in understanding the needs and problems of new teachers. We decided to base our work on the structures that already existed within the Project.

We would invite the participants to join our courses, consult with them one-on-one, and bring them together in reflective meetings. In addition, with the help of Ed Osterman, we created a Listserv where the conversation could be free, open, and safe.

The listserv was an outstanding element of the success of our New-Teacher Initiative, functioning as many things for the new teachers: as a haven for difficult days; a source of advice for pedagogical questions; a place to let off steam about frustrations; and a place to share successes.

Moreover, the focus on teaching writing through the use of writing was key to counteracting unsupportive culture in the schools and building a close, online community.

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