THE EMERGING PRACTICES OF
THE NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT'S
NEW TEACHER INITIATIVE

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PART ONE:

THE INTRODUCTION

This report, "The Emerging Practices of the National Writing Project's New Teacher Initiative," describes the "teaching practices" that emerged from the planning, implementing and refining of the New Teacher Initiative (NTI) programs over the first three years of the initiative. Just as an accomplished teacher develops a repertoire of effective classroom activities and strategies over time, in the same way the 18 New Teacher Initiative (NTI) sites developed a repertoire of practices for educating and supporting beginning teachers. And just as an experienced classroom teacher's repertoire of strategies greatly influences student outcomes, so did the practices the NTI programs developed shape the outcomes, or benefits accrued to the novice teachers participating in the New Teacher Initiative.

Though many strategies were developed in the NTI through the process of implementation and revision, only a handful emerged as especially viable at a range of sites. In this report we identify four most commonly adopted NTI program practices, drawing on several specific site examples as illustrations. The report then highlights the benefits and challenges of each practice, and we discuss some cross-cutting lessons learned from these four major practices. Finally we offer some broader perspectives on the emerging practices of the New Teacher Initiative.

Our report shares the knowledge that NTI sites accrued about conducting new teacher support within a National Writing Project context. Therefore, although of interest to external audiences, it is intended primarily to inform the internal Writing Project audience. In the spirit of this initiative where "teachers teaching teachers" was central, so is this report intended as a tool to serve "sites teaching sites" about new teacher support.

This report is organized into three parts. They are as follows:

Part One: The Introduction
We summarize the topic of this report and briefly describe its organization.

Part Two: The Emerging Practices and Their Benefits and Challenges
Drawing on the sites' own reporting, as well as the observations and interviews we conducted during the course of our study of the NTI, we report on four common strategies or practices used most frequently in NTI programs. We describe each one in detail, and then from our perspective discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each of the four. We conclude this section with a discussion of lessons learned by looking across all four major strategies.

Part Three: Summary Thoughts
In this final section of the report we step back to view the emerging practices from an initiative level. We offer our summary thoughts about the significance of this dimension of the NTI to the overall initiative.

PART TWO:

**THE EMERGING PRACTICES
AND THEIR
BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES**

At the start of the New Teacher Initiative the18 sites involved faced a compelling design challenge – how to best support new teachers within the context of their National Writing Project site and the districts they served. Within those constraints the NTI teams had much freedom to develop programs that would best fit the needs of the new teacher population in their service area. Drawing upon their personal experiences and sites' strengths, the NTI leadership teams planned various activities and strategies that they expected would offer high-quality support to beginning teachers.

What came next was a natural developmental process in which program designs were implemented, evaluated and refined over the following three years. Both at their sites and within the NTI community, the leadership teams reflected on their work and re-designed their programs accordingly. NTI sites learned from one another, as teachers at the Writing Project learn from one another to improve their instructional repertoire. It was not surprising, then, that while there were many different approaches implemented in the early stages of the NTI, eventually the work of supporting new teachers converged around a handful of tested, refined and "proven" practices.

The four major practices that emerged from the "research and development" efforts carried out at the NTI sites included the following:

- **Workshops Series** – A majority of NTI sites held some kind of regular meetings or professional development sessions for their new teacher participants. These were designed to give new teachers a chance to express their concerns and questions, to talk with one another as well as with veteran teachers (Teacher Consultants or TCs), and to learn writing and literacy strategies and techniques they could take back to their classrooms to use with their own students.

- **On-site Mentoring and Coaching** – A small group of sites organized their veteran TCs to mentor or coach new teachers at their own schools. This strategy generally happened where TCs and new teachers worked in the same school.

- **On-line Support** – There were several different strategies for supporting new teachers in this category, all of which took place on-line but varied in purpose and design. Many NTI sites attempted to establish some kind of specially-designated NTI listserv. They were generally, but not always, facilitated by one of the NTI TCs at the site. For the most part they were intended to continue and deepen both relationships and conversations that were started at the events where new teachers and TCs met face-to-face. In addition several of the sites provided on-line, individual mentoring, matching up TCs with new teachers to engage in email dialogue. Both novices and veterans could pose questions, discuss possible solutions, and develop supportive relationships. In addition, almost all the sites used email correspondence to facilitate communication among NTI leaders and new teacher participants.

- **Teacher Research** – Some sites developed teacher research opportunities for new teachers. Some took the form of a graduate credit course while others were more informal.

Our NTI study and previous reporting focused almost exclusively on Cohort One sites. Therefore in our descriptions of the four emerging strategies their experiences appear more frequently. However, it is important for the reader to know that our interviews with Cohort Two site teams corroborated much of what we heard from the first cohort. Their work with new teachers converged around the same designs and practices, and we also heard from both cohorts similar testimonies about the benefits and challenges of each.

Workshop Series

With a few exceptions NTI sites planned for and attempted to offer new teachers in their service area some kind of professional development experience organized as a workshop series. The specific designs varied considerably from site to site. However all of them involved some kind of regular meetings, typically once a month or quarterly. The meetings were sometimes highly directed and structured and sometimes more responsive and open-ended. The purposes and modes of many evolved over time as the NTI teams responded to issues participants surfaced, and as the teams learned what they were uniquely situated to offer new teachers. We provide several sample descriptions of workshops to give the reader a sense of their variation and of how the workshop designs evolved over the course of the initiative.

In the second year of the NTI the **D.C. Area Writing Project** NTI made quarterly meetings available to all new teachers in the district. The purpose was, according to the Site Coordinator, "To make room for the new teachers, to give them a place at the table." The NTI meetings served multiple purposes. First, they served as a platform for introducing the DCAWP to new teachers and vice versa. They also helped the NWP site maintain a high profile in the district, and they also established closer relationships with the 15 to 20 novice teachers who participated. At each of these quarterly meetings NTI TCs discussed writing strategies, offered new teachers advice on classroom management and survival skills, gave tips on how to organize the professional portfolio the school district requires of all teachers, and invited new teachers to attend other DCAWP events and activities. They also used the meetings to introduce the beginners to veteran TC mentors who were "on call" for support and advice.

The heart of the NTI program designed by the **Chicago Area Writing Project** was a 10-week workshop series. Structured as a seminar, each session focused on a particular aspect of writing instruction. In the second year, as the Chicago team settled on the workshop series as the major vehicle for their NTI program, the sessions were structured to include: 1) a "town meeting" for new teachers to "vent" and share, 2) a presentation on a focal topic by a veteran TC guest speaker, 3) time for teams of participants to work on a research project, 4) book study which included "literature circles," and 5) an independent study component in which participants were asked to research a topic, write an essay and present to the rest of the group. In the third and final year the design of the workshop series shifted somewhat to include a "more exploratory reflection into new teachers' practices." Participants were asked to read educational journals about teaching writing and/or professional development and to write about the classroom implications of these. The Year Three site report noted, "Participants were encouraged to look at their lesson plans and assignments and to experiment with their newly discovered knowledge, a change from the previous year."

The **Oklahoma State University Writing Project** NTI offered monthly after-school inservices to approximately 10 to 15 NTI participants. Led by four TCs and a staff member from the district's professional development office, the sessions offered new teachers regular opportunities to share their early teaching experiences with other new teachers in the context of content-specific workshops. The beginners were invited to articulate their most pressing concerns, which the NTI team then consciously tried to address in subsequent sessions through TC or veteran teacher presentations or facilitated discussions. Topics for the sessions included classroom management, student-led conferences, and parent conferences; they often made reference to the Tulsa Model (a district approach which overlays all instruction in the district). Also in each session TCs introduced a different writing strategy or approach, such as "Poems for Two Voices" or "Quick Writes."

In Philadelphia at the **PhilWP** NTI a workshop series was launched in the spring of the second year of their NTI participation. The NTI hoped to "distinguish itself" from the district-provided induction programs by focusing on building community among the new teachers and the TCs. The NTI intended to connect new teachers to "a teacher-led, ongoing network of teachers" where they would not only gain specific information about the teaching of writing, but also become part of a sustaining, professional community. Of particular importance to the PhilWP NTI was the idea of giving new teachers a strong voice. They declined to "deliver" a "one size fits all" program, but rather, like OSUWP, designed each workshop session in response to new teachers' questions and concerns. Readings, discussions, and reflective writing were centered on many of the issues new teachers raised – for example, working with parents in urban schools, negotiating between the highly structured core curriculum used in the district and their own need for creativity, etc. The series culminated in many of the new teacher participants presenting their own practices at a "Celebration of Literacy" event held especially for new teachers across the district.

The Benefits of a Workshop Series

- Professional development, structured as a workshop series, is a strategy that is commonly used in public school settings, and was therefore easily recognizable to teachers and administrators in contexts external to the Writing Project. No one had to explain what a workshop series is.
- Because workshop series are structured as regular events that occur consistently over time, they offer NTIs the opportunity to design processes and activities for new teachers that cumulatively built knowledge and experiences. In this sense the strategy lent itself well to establishing trust and rapport, to building community, to learning and practicing skills, or to scaffolding and developing a core set of writing strategies and activities – in short, to any kind of steady work that builds on itself.
- The workshop series strategy is flexible and responsive. It was easily adjusted by NTI teams as needs and issues arose in the course of the series.
- In its entirety, a workshop series provides a fairly intensive experience for new teachers. After completing the series it is likely that they understand some key tenets of the Writing Project – reflective practice, looking at student work, etc. They also likely grasp essential writing skills and topics that are taught. Thus a workshop series held high potential for new teachers to serve as a firm stepping stone into the larger NWP site.

- A NTI workshop series also had the potential of serving as a showcase for TCs to share their knowledge, thus serving the site as a venue for teacher leadership capacity building. Of special note was that many of the NTI efforts included TCs on their leadership teams who were relatively new teachers themselves. Thus the workshop structure provided them with a relatively safe place to take their first steps as teacher leaders.

The Challenges of a Workshop Series

- Easy recognition is a benefit to workshop series design strategy, but it also presented the NTI sites with a challenge. Because it is a frequently-used professional development design in school and district settings, a NTI workshop ran the risk of becoming indistinguishable from the multitude of other school and district offerings, especially for hurried and harried new teachers. Many of the NTI teams struggled to communicate what was unique and worthwhile about their work when it was designed as a workshop series.
- As a result of its in-distinguishability many of the NTIs faced enrollment issues. It was difficult to enroll new teachers in the workshop series they planned. Several NTI teams planned workshop series but were forced to cancel or to downsize them because they couldn't enroll enough new teacher participants.
- Moreover, the advantage that a workshop series provides, namely the opportunity to develop an agenda over time, also had a "down side" which contributed to the difficulties NTI teams faced enrolling new teachers. We learned that for new teachers not only is a NTI workshop similar to the many others they are obligated to attend, they are reluctant to sign up for still another professional development activity, especially one that requires the commitment of regularly scheduled sessions and that extends for several months or even a school semester. As one site's reporting noted, "New teachers find it very difficult to commit to regular scheduled meetings."
- Sustaining participation and maintaining a constant audience over the duration of a workshop series proved to be a challenge to NTI sites, especially during the winter months when weather turned bad. Although at times this proved to be a "blessing in disguise," enabling the NTI teams to work with a small and committed group of new teachers, in general attrition was a common issue connected to the workshop strategy.
- A workshop series, although it enables NTI teams to build experiences and knowledge over time, may lack a necessary in-depth, intense and transformative experience. Several NTI teams compensated for this drawback by designing some kind of "kick-off" event or retreat, or by "book-ending" their workshop series with a kick-off event at the beginning and a culminating, celebration experience at the end. Both methods seemed to provide a more intense, immersion experience for new teachers that help distinguish the NTI and the NWP from more standard professional development.

On-site Mentoring and Coaching

On-site mentoring was a very appealing design to the NTI leadership teams. In theory it could provide beginning teachers with the close, intense and individualized professional support the teams felt beginning teachers needed. The sites that developed a practice of on-site mentoring created different ways of structuring their work, based on their TCs' availability and experience, school release time and novices' interest and time.

We offer two illustrations of on-site mentoring, one from the Maryland Writing Project (MWP NTI), and the other from the New York City Writing Project (NYCWP). Together they offer an interesting contrast in approach and design to an appealing strategy where veteran Teacher Consultants work one-on-one with new teachers at their school sites.

The Maryland WP NTI's On-site Mentoring

The major focus of the Maryland NTI for the first two years of their participation in the NTI was on-site mentoring. The leadership team, comprised of the Site Coordinator and a small group of mentoring TCs, often introduced their work to others with a parable – the story of the young man on the seashore littered with tens of thousands of starfish stranded by the tide. He spends his days walking the beach, picking up starfish, and one by one throwing them carefully back into the water. When asked how he can persist in such a daunting task – after all, what is one man in comparison to the infinite number of starfish?, he replies, "It made a difference for that one."

The Maryland NTI saw their work not only as "teachers teaching teachers," but also as "teachers nurturing teachers" in the confusing, tumultuous contexts in which they all taught. At the Maryland NTI individual TCs initiated and fostered relationships with new teachers at their school site, supporting them in any way they could. The TC mentors provided such things as emotional support, advice on classroom survival skills, or help with filling out forms and preparing for parent conferences. They also provided new teachers with resources on writing strategies, and occasionally, when time allowed, they modeled lessons or strategies in the new teacher's classroom. The TCs worked opportunistically, seizing time with the new teachers as they could. The majority of the mentors were full-time classroom teachers themselves, so "meeting with the mentee" often occurred before school, during lunch, or for a few moments between classes. The pressure of finding time to meet with one another was one of the greatest challenges faced by the Maryland NTI, according to the TCs and Site Coordinator.

Through the process of communication and relationship-building between the TC mentors and the new teacher "mentees," the new teachers were deliberately brought into the larger NWP site community where they were offered additional support They were specifically invited to participate in the site's Saturday Write to Learn Workshops, for example. Or they were invited to attend, often in partnership with their own mentor, one of the more intensive professional development series offered by the site, such as the Inquiry Institute.

Distinctions between veteran and new teachers were soon blurred. In the second summer of the NTI several mentees attended the Summer Invitational Institute, becoming TCs in their own right and taking on mentoring even newer teachers at their schools. When a starfish was saved it did make a difference, as this new teacher attested:

> *The mentor has been my absolute life line through this whole process because I have had a hideous, hideous first 18 months… She and the folks at the Maryland Writing Project, the Write to Learn Saturdays and the New Teacher Initiative were there every time I had a crisis – and I had them… …It was not an easy go and every time I think about the New Teacher Initiative, I am thinking, that is the only reason that I am a teacher today… Just her presence and her very quiet confidence in me gave me a lot of reassurance.*

The New York City Writing Project NTI also provided on-site mentoring, but their work in the classroom with new teachers was organized very differently.

The New York City WP NTI's On-site Mentoring

At the NYCWP the NTI effort mirrored the structure of how the site has organized its work with city teachers for many years. Thus the basic mode of working with experienced teachers, through school-based seminars, on-site coaching sessions, and on-line dialogue, has carried over to the NTI program. The NTI leadership reasoned that in the same way that these venues promote reflection and improved teaching among seasoned practitioners, so too would they benefit novices.

Typically TCs spend two days a week in their designated schools, where their dedicated role is to serve as on-site mentors. Sometimes the TC provides demonstration lessons, or conducts observations, or facilitates lesson planning with the new teacher. According to the Site Coordinator, "Our ultimate aim is always to create and demonstrate the value of a reflective professional community in which teachers investigate complex questions about their own practice, look critically at what they do, and receive both support and guidance from colleagues as they attempt to refine and improve instruction."

What the TC mentors offered to do in the new teacher's classroom was the result of a "negotiation" between the TC and the new teacher. The NTI mentors intended that the new teachers realize that the coach was a partner working alongside the teacher, not a judge or critic. In particular, listening was a mentoring technique that the TCs have found to be especially effective in creating an equal partnership, allowing a new teacher to express voice and authority. The Site Coordinator explained:

Some of the TCs discovered that when they worked with new teachers, they needed to spend more time listening and not just providing advice. One of our Teacher Consultants said, "One thing I have learned is that there is value for new teachers in just being heard and listened to. I think this is because they are always being taught, and given advice." The consultants learned that sometimes they needed to hold back with their advice… you could come across as too much of an expert. New teachers need that chance to discover things for themselves… As a coach, you need to allow new teachers to feel that… and give them some direction without negating whatever it is that they were bringing to the conversation.

The Benefits of On-site Mentoring

- Working one-on-one was almost always a personal and professional pleasure for the teachers involved. Therefore, this strategy had great appeal and the potential for providing great satisfaction to both the TC mentor and the new teacher.
- In those cases where school environments were rife with confusion, uncertainty, and at times even danger, a relationship with an experienced and supportive veteran teacher at the school site was <u>exactly</u> what a new teacher needed.
- After many years of work observing and evaluating professional development we have come to believe that the unit of change that often proves to be most effective over the long-term is the individual – not the school or the district. The on-site mentoring strategy also assumes that the unit of change is the individual. What a new teachers learned through interactions with NTI mentors could affect them for life.

The Challenges of On-site Mentoring

- The on-site mentoring strategy was only as good as the mentors that provide support in new teachers' classrooms. In some sites the mentors were new TCs and their orientation to, and understanding of, the Writing Project, as well as to the role of mentor, was still limited.
- Without either strong intentionality or deliberately engineered links to the rest of the NTI program and the NWP site, there was the potential danger that mentors and new teachers remained isolated units in their own schools, making community-building difficult.
- The site capacity to provide on-site TC mentors was a challenge for the NTI programs. Several of them hoped to offer new teachers on-site mentoring as part of their NTI services, but were unable to muster a sufficient number of TCs to serve in that capacity. (The full-time release model used in the NYCWP NTI was the only one of its kind among the 18 NTI sites.)
- When TC mentors were also full-time classroom teachers, finding time to conduct mentoring was extremely challenging. Most of the hours they devoted to mentoring was strictly volunteer work, and had to be wedged into their already full schedule of regular roles and responsibilities.
- When individual TC mentors were charged with steering their own course with each individual new teacher there were some advantages, the chief of which was their ability to adjust what they did with each teacher and in each set of circumstances in wise and responsive ways. On the other hand, when individual TCs were creating and negotiating support "programs" as they went, often on the fly and through great personal sacrifice, the challenge for the overall NTI was to establish coherency and common ground.

On-line Support

Providing new teachers with on-line support was a strategy that appealed strongly to almost all sites. In theory the use of technology would allow new teachers and NTI leaders to communicate easily and readily, to extend and deepen conversations initiated in face-to-face contexts without having to leave school or home. We describe four site's strategies for providing on-line mentoring and support to new teachers, each of which represents a different design.

The **Philadelphia WP NTI** envisioned using on-line strategies to build a strong NTI community among new teachers and facilitating TCs. The first year of the NTI the team planned to provide both: 1) on-line mentoring between experienced TCs and new teachers to take place between monthly meetings, and 2) on-line conversations through the use of a NTI listserv. These on-line support services were the basis of one of the site's major inquiry questions: "How do on-line conversations and mentoring support teachers?"

After the first year the NTI team learned that the listserv was occasionally active, but more often "uneven" throughout the year. Although almost everyone read the listserv communications there were some new teachers who never contributed. The on-line mentoring component of their work met with mixed reviews, "including mixed degrees of receptivity" on the part of the new teachers. Though a few strong relationships emerged through on-line mentoring, for many of the new teacher participants on-line communication seemed to lack a personal touch, and there were those who never responded to their on-line mentors. The team also learned that

setting clear goals and expectations early on for both the on-line mentoring and listserv components would have probably made both more successful. Whether or not participation in the on-line activities was optional or mandatory had not been made clear.

Overall, the NTI team felt the listserv and on-line mentoring strategies did not build the depth of community and relationship the NTI had hoped to achieve. They realized that more face-to-face, personalized contacts in conjunction with the electronic communication would have achieved a stronger network of new teachers and TC mentors.

The **Chicago Area Writing Project** NTI aimed "to use technology to inspire and educate new teachers, and connect them with other urban teachers." The NTI created a website where they proposed to establish an on-line discussion group focused on current issues in education. To support the discussion they created an internship for a new teacher and "NTI graduate" from Year One, whose role was to post articles and response questions, and to lead the discussion in a "chat room" fashion. According to the Site Coordinator, "We are using the on-line component of our work to build new teachers' background with instructional material and research articles, and things they felt were missing in their background…" Disappointingly however, the response from the new teachers was lukewarm. The Site Coordinator explained, "We learned that the "chat room" venue was welcomed, but some of the participants rejected the idea of assigned articles and/or topics. In our town hall meeting some of the new teachers asked that they be allowed to suggest topics or articles… so finding the right contents for our on-line activity remains a challenge in our NTI work." This was so much the case that in Year Three the site decided to discontinue this component of their program.

One of the components of a three-pronged approach at the **New York City Writing Project** NTI was a listserv. The listserv was initiated after at least one face-to-face meeting of all the NTI participants, and was intended to allow new teachers to participate in a written conversation with fellow novices. With the exception of the TCs who facilitate the conversations, no other teachers were participants. In this way the listserv provided a "safe place" for new teachers to converse about their students, their practice and current issues of concern. The design of the listserv evolved. In Year One of the NTI the listserv was facilitated by the two TCs who began the conversation by asking the new teachers to respond to an article. After few responded to the article but many posted other more personal concerns or questions, it became clear that the listserv was most active and effective when the dialogue originated with the new teachers themselves. Thus in Year Two, TCs largely let participants take the lead in directing the discussion. Still TCs had an important role: they continually invited participation in the conversation, provided affirmation, and reiterated and offered questions regarding new teachers' postings. They worked "behind the scenes" to build community among the group. In Year Three the listserv continued, in conjunction with a few face-to-face meetings. In fact, while he could not attend the meetings, one of the previous year's participants who relocated was able to post listings from Arizona.

The Benefits of On-line Support

- On-line listserv communications were an efficient strategy for getting out information. Even at those NTI sites that had ambitious, but thwarted plans for how they might use on-line strategies for supporting new teachers, the listserv still served in an important utilitarian function.
- The NTI sites learned that listserv conversations involve two kinds of users: the active participants – those who join in the talk, and the listeners – those who listen in without advancing their own thoughts, but still find value in listening and reflecting on what was

said. There was value for both, and the distinction helped teams think about the design of their on-line support structures more strategically.

- As one site noted in their Year Three report, the listserv has the potential for providing "a model of professional conversation." It has significant stand-alone value in that regard.
- Moreover, on-line listserv and mentoring strategies can very effectively continue, expand, or deepen conversations that began in face-to-face venues, such as the workshops or classes the NTIs sponsored.
- Sites learned that their NTI work surfaced specific features that ensure the likelihood of achieving a high-quality professional conversation. They are:

    1) designating a "driver," one or two specially appointed TCs to shepherd the listserv conversation, to keep it moving and "work behind the scenes" so that the conversation doesn't lapse into entropy;
    2) centering the conversation on a specific purpose, or actual and mutually meaningful experiences or problems;
    3) making expectations and requirements about participation in the listserv articulated and clear; and
    4) giving new teachers some power or voice in the process, letting them originate and focus discussions on their own concerns.

The Challenges of On-line Support

- On-line support to new teachers was no panacea. Sites learned "on-line" could not replace "face-to-face" meetings and interactions. Designing how to conduct on-line mentoring and support proved to be surprisingly challenging to many of the NTI sites.
- For many new teachers participating in a listserv exchange of ideas was burdensome, another assignment, or as one NTI Thinking Partner said, "just something sitting there waiting on their computer." It was challenging for the NTI teams to design the strategy to make the benefits of participation in a listserv process visible to new teachers.
- Sites came to understand that facilitation of the listserv required a sizeable investment in someone's time. Facilitation also required significant skill and experience, often of a different sort than more traditional TC duties. The sites learned that the listserv conversation was generally only as good as the facilitator(s).
- Issues of how to structure on-line mentoring and support were also challenging. How "open" and informal, or how "closed" and formal should the structure of on-line listserv and supports be? Neither highly structured nor very loosely structured seemed to hit the right key.

Teacher Research

At the beginning of the New Teacher Initiative relatively few NTI sites focused on or incorporated elements of teacher research into the design of their new teacher support programs. Although conducting research into classroom practice exemplifies the reflection process and the inquiry stance the NWP values so highly, conventional wisdom said that teacher research was an "advanced topic." Teacher research was for more practiced teachers, not appropriate for beginners. It required, so the thinking went, a high level of intellectual rigor, commitment and time that new teachers simply did not have.

Interestingly however, following the lead of the one or two sites that practiced teacher research with their NTI participants early on, other sites incorporated more and more elements of teacher research into their NTI programs as the initiative progressed. The two NTI vignettes we offer below illustrate how teacher research-focused designs were used effectively to support new teachers.

The Third Coast WP NTI's Teacher Research

As it had in the first year, the Third Coast NTI offered new teachers in their service area a workshop series in Year Two. Beginning with a one-day fall retreat, the TCWP-NTI hosted six after-school meetings. Each meeting began with a dinner and social time where teachers engaged in informal conversation about their practice, then a "How Things Are Going" discussion and problem solving session, then a presentation of current educational issues or content-specific strategies, and finally a focus on the new teacher's own research process. The first year was considered successful, but the NTI team wanted a little more intellectual rigor for their new teachers. Thus in the second year the teacher research component was greatly "beefed up," because, as the Site Coordinator explained, "The first year was too much directed by us and not so much directed by the teachers themselves working on stuff. We wanted to turn it over to the participants, so that the new teachers weren't just ingesting knowledge, but they were creating it too."

The NTI team's "theory of action" was that by engaging new teachers in the process of inquiry, it would deepen the teachers' learning, enhance their professional experience and build a common ground for collegial dialogue. Each participant developed a research project based on classroom practice. They were supported in developing their skills as researchers through varied activities including selected readings from texts provided by NTI, whole- and small-group discussion and presentations from guest speakers. In addition, in a deliberate effort to make the inquiry process manageable for new teachers, TCWP tailored the final product to meet the needs of the individual. Some teachers delved deeply into their topic while others kept a simple journal of their thoughts and observations. "Focusing more on the process, rather than on the final product gave our teacher-researchers more time to examine their data from many angles." All of the NTI participants shared their findings at the culminating two-day retreat.

Assessing the NTI year's work the Site Coordinator noted that the teacher research process helped build a feeling of a community among participants. "That is why the teacher researcher component is so good, because it is a unifying thing that everybody can talk about." A NTI TC who helped facilitate the sessions noted:

As mentors to new teachers, we need to ask them what they need more often, ask them to reflect and rationalize and categorize, and put into place and make sense of what it is that they are thinking about. That takes a real hands-off approach in a lot of ways, but it also takes some direction. I think what we did this year working with our new teachers, we became much more resource agents than we were people who were going to direct them in a particular way... that seemed to really open them up to feel free to talk with each other.

The Boston WP NTI's Teacher Research

After coming close to quitting following a frustrating first year of trying to recruit new teachers into a proposed summer institute, the Boston NTI leadership team re-grouped. They moved to an inquiry model, and focused the fall of their second year planning for a graduate level teacher research course conceived of as their core NTI offering. What emerged was the "Teacher Inquiry as Support and Empowerment for Newer Teachers" course: *Through this course we seek to create a community of new teachers inquiring into their practice. Participants will each construct and investigate a question arising from their teaching. The process will empower teachers to be in charge of their career-long learning as reflective practitioners.*

This spoke to the new teachers in the Boston area, described by the Site Director as "graduates of good liberal arts colleges, where you'd been told all your life to ask questions and think for yourself." In spite of a good response from new teachers to the idea of teacher research, the NTI team was careful to offer teacher research that would be palatable and appropriate for new teachers. It was not academic research. The class did not begin, for example, with an introduction to research methodology. Rather the course had to be "centered on talking and writing about your classroom, and then some sort of semi-structured way to start asking questions about your classroom," according to the Site Director. "It would have been easy to go wrong, to make it too formal, too early."

The course proved to be very successful. All but one of the original 12 new teachers completed the course. Almost all reported, in their end-of-the-year assessments, that they wished the course could have gone longer. Over half of the new teachers enrolled in the course again in the third year of the NTI.

Just as importantly the Site Coordinators felt that they had accomplished their goal of creating a community of new teachers through the process of research and inquiry. They cited the power of the writing new teachers were required to do in building a strong sense of community:

> *By writing – I should tell you that every session we began with "When I noticed _____in my class, I wondered_____" – it creates community because you are going to share it. There is a read around. You share it, and then the very specifics of your teaching life are out there. It is a very specific thing, and therefore your vulnerabilities are there. Your hopes are there. We laugh about it because it strikes us as common. And in that sharing, a community is built. The writing is important because when you write, you are going inward and you are saying things that you probably might not say in conversation, because you didn't have quiet time to put them down.*

Similar reflections were echoed in the Year Three report. Teaching the course again confirmed the feelings of the NTI leaders: that they had empowered their participants by equipping them with critical professional skills that would support them in the next stage of development as practitioners:

> *We have concluded from our experience that shared systematic inquiry enables newer teachers to recognize: 1) that they have both knowledge and method to investigate their classrooms and productively reflect on their students and pedagogy; and 2) that with one another – and support from NWP/BWP – they can create a practitioner community to support their growth as teachers and leaders.*

The Benefits of Teacher Research

- Sites learned that new teachers, as do veterans, respond well to an intellectually meaningful, rigorous and captivating activity such as teacher research. Teacher research has the potential to serve as a successful strategy for new teacher support.
- Teacher research, when conducted effectively, surfaced key questions and practices in a novice teacher's classroom, thereby holding the potential to play a significant role in teachers' development as thoughtful practitioners.
- Sites learned that teacher research or inquiry could serve as a successful professional development experience. They also learned that it could serve as a highly effective strategy for introducing new teachers to a "professional stance" toward their teaching, a stance that could remain with them throughout their teaching career.
- The teacher research process – examining questions and issues that arise in one's own classroom – incorporates processes that exemplify many of the core NWP values, especially the principle of inquiry and self-reflection. Teacher research relies on key social practices – such as "honoring teacher knowledge," and "creating forums for teacher sharing, dialogue and critique"[1] that are central to Writing Project work. Thus a great benefit of this strategy was that through the NTI teacher research programs, novices became quickly enculturated into the Writing Project.

The Challenges of Teacher Research

- Implementing a teacher research strategy required a high level of capacity and skill from the facilitators. They had to know the field of teacher research well enough to carefully scaffold the research processes for new teachers, and to guide novices through an intellectually demanding set of tasks and experiences. Not all the NTI sites had this particular knowledge and leadership capacity.
- Moreover, the NTI teacher research leaders must be able to "walk the walk" as well as "talk the talk." In other words they must reflect the values inherent in the teacher research process in an authentic way, modeling them in their own practice of facilitation and leadership. Again, not all sites had this particular capacity.
- Still another challenge was audience. Teacher research is probably not for every new teacher. So the challenge for the NTIs was to help new teachers understand the nature, demands and rewards of the teacher research process.
- Finally, a great challenge inherent in the teacher research strategy was time. Teacher research demands a considerable investment of time which is necessary for processes of talking, questioning, writing, reflecting, and sharing that drive the individual inquiry.

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[1] Ann Lieberman and Diane R. Wood, *Inside the National Writing Project: Connecting Network Learning and Classroom Teaching* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2003), p. 22

Cross-Cutting Lessons Learned

As we look across all the practices the NTI sites developed, and especially at the most common four we have just described in detail, we see a list of cross-cutting lessons learned that emerged during the first three years of the New Teacher Initiative. These are likely to be instructive both internally to NWP sites and externally to audiences interested in new teacher support. We now discuss these lessons briefly.

- As the NTI leadership teams launched their first programs they all learned that recruiting teachers to participate was much harder than expected. They learned that new teachers have far too many demands on their time to accept lightly an invitation to enroll in yet another meeting or program.
- For many of the same reasons, they learned that they had to distinguish themselves from other new teacher induction and support programs, to demonstrate how NTI was different.
- Beginning NTI programs also learned that just because teachers came a first time, it did not necessarily mean that they would stay. Extracting a long-term commitment out of a beginning teacher, especially in the first few meetings, was challenging.
- Almost all the NTI sites hoped to recruit significant numbers of new teachers to their programs. Almost all were disappointed in the number they actually had participating. Site teams were disappointed at first when a group of 25-30 decreased to 10, but they soon realized that the new teachers who remained were committed and eager. Sites learned that "fewer participants… often means increased rigor and commitment."
- Sites learned that finding the balance between supporting and challenging new teachers was critical. Especially at the beginning of the NTI all sites seemed to grapple with the tension between low-pressure expectations and events versus more intensive, reflective, inquiry-based, and long-term time commitments. Focusing on reflective writing instead of easing "every new teacher headache" was a judgment call, as was, for example, requiring teachers to attend retreats or institutes instead of giving them more time to themselves. While continuing to honor the need of beginners to express themselves and their needs, as the NTI program practices matured they were more likely to weigh in on the side of rigor and challenge.
- Most sites found that it was important to establish and foster the link between NTI and NWP in a transparent way for new teachers. This connection to the larger professional NWP community proved to be one of the major distinguishing features of the NTIs, one that set them apart from more run-of-the-mill professional development offered by schools and districts. While they spent a good deal of time supporting novices "where they were," they recognized the need to look beyond and into the future as well – to extend the professional journey for the novices, to inculcate them into the larger network – as a way for the teachers to grow, but also to benefit the sites. Thus their NTI practices, whether a workshop series or teacher research, almost always included deliberate invitations to the local Writing Project site.

PART THREE:

SUMMARY THOUGHTS

In this final section of the report we offer some summary thoughts from a broader perspective. We look beyond the level of individual emerging practices and cross-cutting lessons learned to the overall initiative. What have we observed about the dimension of practice vis-à-vis the growing capacity of the New Teacher Initiative as a whole that is important to report?

- At almost all of the 18 NTI sites new teacher support programs did indeed take root and grow. Like new teachers developing classroom strategies and practices, NTI sites had to forge their own way in a land that was relatively foreign to them. As the initiative progressed, however, we saw a fairly predictable progression to the development of a "practice" of new teacher support. It involved sites first generating a plethora of ideas and plans, from those then selecting a successful few, and finally settling on and refining some set of activities and strategies which evolved into what one might think of as a site-level "practice." In fact the process of experimentation and evolution, which was deliberately supported by the organizational structures and the resources available to each of the NTI programs, was critical. It created convergence across the initiative on particular practices that "worked" and worked well for new teachers.

- Indeed the practices for new teacher support that emerged from the NTI in the first three years proved to be very effective. The evidence for their efficacy is the outcome – a long list of benefits that accrued to the beginning teachers who participated in the NTI programs. The many benefits new teachers reported to us ranged from those that addressed very basic needs, to those that supported and developed their writing and teaching of writing, and to those that influenced their thinking about themselves as professional educators. (For a full discussion of this topic see our report, "The Benefits to New Teachers of the National Writing Project's New Teacher Initiative.")

- Today, as a result of three years of work, there exists a bank of practitioners' knowledge among NTI sites and individuals. The body of this report attests to the fact that people know something about new teacher support that they did not three years ago. Moreover a community of practitioners has also developed around the support of new teachers that spans across the NWP sites. As the NTI continues to gain experience in serving new teachers, and as those experiences are shared from site to site within a community context, we would expect, as we would for the classroom practice of a maturing teacher involved in a professional learning community, for initiative-wide practices and knowledge to continue to grow and evolve.