Poised for a Leap in Evolution:
Understanding the Power of the NWP
An Evaluator's Perspective

This is the script for the slide presentation of the same title, presented by Laura Stokes at the NWP Annual Meeting 2011 in Chicago. Laura Stokes and Mark St. John of Inverness Research developed the presentation, with assistance on data analysis provided by researchers from Inverness Research and the NWP.

Slide 1. Hello everyone, Greetings from Inverness Research. I'm thrilled to be here today. My history with the Writing Project goes back to 1981 when I became a site director in California. As part of Inverness Research, my colleagues and I have studied the Writing Project for over 15 years. We've also studied dozens of other projects where people tried to build networks, or wished they could take a good idea to national scale. So the thoughts I'm sharing with you today come mainly from what we know about the Writing Project, but with an understanding of how the Writing Project is different from other projects.

Slide 2. After a long period of dependence on slowly but steadily increasing federal dollars, the dramatic shift in the federal funding scene puts the Writing Project into the position of making an evolutionary leap forward. This afternoon I want to offer a perspective on that leap.

Slide 3. I'll offer three lenses on the strength of the Writing Project going forward.

Slide 4 (Section 1.) First, some reminders of what the Writing Project has been able to build.

Slide 5. Here is a picture of the accumulated teacher leadership development since the Bay Area Writing Project's first institute in 1974. The next phase of the Writing Project is standing on the shoulders of this leadership.

Slide 6. Sites have offered well over a million and a half program hours just since 1994, when we began tracking this data. Every single hour takes planning, design thinking, and expertise.

Slide 7. Beyond the thousands of students served in Youth and Community programs, the Writing Project reaches students indirectly through the teachers who participate in Writing Project programs. Institute participants alone have taught well over 6 million students. This is probably a low estimate.

Slide 8. The usual dilemma that happens when people try take a good idea and build it to national scale is that fidelity and rigor suffer, that quality dilutes. This is a real complaint of funders. In the Writing Project, though, that doesn't happen. Across the network, the quality of Writing Project institutes is reliably high, year in and year out.

Slide 9. The Writing Project is one of very few professional development projects that involve people in multiple content areas. Another sign of its quality is that the practical value of the institutes is high, no matter what subject the participants teach. The Writing Project makes good on the claim that writing is important throughout the curriculum.

Slide 10. Within the Writing Project model, there are very many ways that sites create generative structures for professional development where teachers are respected, excited, and can deeply explore and study writing and teaching. The Writing Project model relies on local site entrepreneurialism as well as adherence to core values.

Slide 11. (Section 2.) From our perspective studying multiple other projects, often in science and math, the Writing Project is the envy of just about everyone. What makes it so strong? Just as one clue, I quote from a really good new book I'd recommend to you, *Drive*, by Daniel Pink. (For "Why I Write" he tweeted "Because I could never hit a curveball.") It's a book about motivation, what makes people tick, in business organizations and other settings. The key words here are autonomous and connected.

Slide 12. Our answer to what makes the Writing Project so strong is deceptively simple, kind of bringing us back to the basics: The Writing Project is a true networked organization. It is not a top-down franchise where everyone produces the same limp cheeseburger, nor is it simply "pass-through" or grant-making organization. As a network of sites and people, it has particular attributes:
> ➢ It's unified by a shared mission and generates shared knowledge and experience
> ➢ It encourages site entrepreneurialism and individual trajectories of leadership

A network is a uniquely effective type of organization because its structure mirrors the deep human desire for both autonomy and belonging.

Slide 13. There is a lot written on networks, including in the business world, because they're so cost efficient, flexible, and effective—and also because networks are not at all simple to build or to lead. Many of the projects we work with wish they knew how to create a strong and lasting network. Your network is like the air that you breathe, and it's important that you not take it for granted. It's worth reviewing the ABCs of networks: they are all about hubs, affiliates (or nodes), and links. This diagram is from a recent book, very short and readable, *Designing the Networked Organization*, by Ken Everett. This is not a book about education, it's a case of a business, so you can tell that to those MBAs who want to apply business models to education.

Slide 14. Let's look at the advantages of networks. First of all, a lone organization in a locality has a relatively weak voice in the broad political ecology. A network of organizations, however, is an entity that can speak with a louder voice than any given member, that is, can more strongly represent the members' interests in the funding environment. And the arrows go both ways: a member's unique strengths and external linkages also contribute to and benefit the collective.

Slide 15. The Writing Project model is such that each site also becomes a local network of organizations and people. Sites create links among teachers who are ordinarily isolated from one another; sites link schools and districts to one another; and sites link other disparate organizations together around a common mission.

Slide 16. What really matters in a network is the flow of information and resources back and forth across the links. Over time the Writing Project has constructed many kinds of links. They enable the flow of ideas and know-how, and also enable practices that promote quality and careful stewardship of the Writing Project mission and core values. It's especially important that this year, in the midst of deep change and uncertainty, that the NWP leadership found a way to hold this meeting as a way to connect.

Slide 17. The education landscape is littered with good ideas that did not grow out of infancy. Starting up a new professional organization and making it grow and last is extremely challenging. The role of the Writing Project network is not only to provide start-up funds to new sites, but also to link them to experienced people, to field-tested practices, and to multiple other resources. We did a study of cohorts of new sites a few years ago, and it showed that when sites hatch and grow in the Writing Project nest, they triple the amount of work they can do in their first five years.

Slide 18. (Section 3.) Finally, let's consider how the Writing Project's over 3,000 site-years of experience, and its powerful network structure, position it to make an evolutionary leap into the future.

Slide 19. Here, again, is a deceptively simple and yet highly important idea: The accumulated capacity that this network structure has built over time has generated a large fund of capital of multiple types. These are all assets that you are now drawing upon to build your future.
  ➢ **Human capital**—the leadership and expertise of Writing Project people, everywhere they are
  ➢ **Knowledge capital**—the store of practical knowledge, research knowledge, your ability to spread it
  ➢ **Design capital**—the many types generative structures that support development of people, sites, and the network

Slide 20.
- ➤ **Social capital**—the many personal and professional relationships you have accrued
- ➤ **Institutional capital**—particularly the many kinds of local and national partnerships that you've built with all kinds of groups
- ➤ **Political capital**—collective visibility and voice, reputation and track record, "brand"

Slide 21. So when we at Inverness reflect on how the Writing Project can best make this leap into an uncertain future, we simply point out that your development of the network is what has enabled you to produce the multiple assets that you are now using to build your future. And we think continued investment in and stewarding of the <u>network</u>—all three key components: local sites, national offices, and the links and distributed leadership among them all—is what will position you best for your next evolutionary leap.

Slide 22. Mark St John wasn't able to be here today, and when he and I were going over this presentation, he said, "Look, it's simple, just tell them what Ben Franklin said when he signed the Declaration of Independence."

Slide 23. Many thanks to the Inverness Research and Writing Project staff who helped us put the data together.