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Review: Lieberman and Wood's *Inside the National Writing Project*

Katrina Meyer

Ann Lieberman and Diane R. Wood
Inside the National Writing Project
New York: Teachers College Press, 2003
117 pgs.
ISBN 0-8077-4301-1 (paperback)

Graduates of the National Writing Project (NWP) speak of their experience with marked fondness. They attribute the Project with "transforming" their professional lives, reigniting their "passion for teaching," and "changing my life." With comments such as these, it is no wonder that teachers and others with an interest in improving education might want to know more about the NWP. However, such laudatory comments also imply a basic problem with reading about the Project and its activities and philosophies. In other words, the Project is first and foremost an experience, one that involves the individual in serious reflection and study and changes them intellectually, socially, and professionally. In other words, it is awfully hard to describe "if you weren't there."

There will likely be three types of individuals drawn to this study of the National Writing Project: 1) graduates of the project who will want to see if Lieberman and Wood have captured their experience; 2) teachers who have heard about the project but want to learn more; and 3) teachers and writers who care about writing instruction in the schools. In each case, the reader will likely finish the book somewhat wiser, but with ample questions yet to be answered.

The book describes a two-year research study conducted by Lieberman and Wood on the National Writing Project that focused on two specific sites: one at the University of California, Los Angeles operating for 20 years and the other at Oklahoma State

University with a 7-year track record. The authors immersed themselves in the various Project activities and interviewed site directors, current participants, and graduates of the program. In five succinct chapters, the reader is introduced to several intriguing issues that illuminate the possible sources of success for the NWP as well as its future challenges.

Chapter one introduces the reader to the long history of failure of educational reform efforts as well as the failure of traditional models of professional development for teachers. In this context, the history of the establishment of the NWP is set.

Chapter two describes the NWP "model" and "work." Each is based on the fundamental assumption that teachers already possess substantial practical knowledge, drawn from years of experience with students. The "model" includes three core activities that guide participants' interactions: 1) teaching other teachers; 2) reading and discussing educational literature and research; and 3) writing and sharing writing. The "work" describes the social practices that help build community among the participants, encourage each teacher to continuously improve their teaching, and instill a "vision of what it means to be a professional teacher" (p. 13). Fundamental to these elements is a requirement that teachers experience the classroom and writing as a student, reflect on their teaching practice and the processes of writing, and "rethink and revise their own practices" (p. 15).

Chapter three provides more detail on the structure of the NWP experience: the five-week summer institute, the activities for participants that occur in the following year, and the activities of Teacher-Consultants (the project's graduates) in their local schools and districts. A more detailed description of the UCLA and OSU Projects completes the chapter.

Chapter four follows six graduates of the NWP. Two teachers are initiates who participated in the summer institute that was studied in depth; four additional teachers, with between 6 and 20 years experience post-NWP, are also interviewed. Laura, a new initiate, describes her efforts to improve ESL instruction at her school, including the adoption of specific NWP activities for her Spanish-language students. Linda, a 20-year NWP veteran, offers several stories about her implementation of various NWP-inspired activities in her classroom and school.

Chapter five describes the Project's various challenges and contributions. These challenges are important ones, including establishing the nature and extent of its impact on teachers, teacher practices, and student achievement. Several studies on the impact of NWP are reviewed, with ample evidence that teachers change what they do as a result of their participation in the Project. And after their interviews with the six graduates, the researchers "left convinced that what these six teachers had learned through the NWP affected what they did in classrooms, and therefore, what their students experienced there" (p. 81). Unfortunately, a sample of six teachers is small and the connection to student achievement still not entirely proven.

Additional challenges include the ongoing difficulty of embedding NWP in school-university partnerships. The university brings theoretical knowledge to the partnership; the school offers practical knowledge. Each may not fully value the other partner, and yet this partnership is one

of NWP's "greatest strengths and accomplishments" (p. 88).

The authors reason that the NWP's main contribution has been its ability to encourage self-improvement as a writer and teacher, to stimulate teachers' intellectual development, and to instill a sense of professional responsibility including providing leadership to other teachers. And yet, the book leaves one hungry to know much more. While NWP has a track record of changing teachers one by one, can it contribute to large-scale reform; in other words, is it scaleable? Can the Project provide evidence that it has an impact on student learning? If melding theory and practice is crucial to the project's success, how is this done and why is this transforming? What is the connection between writing, learning, and thinking implied in the book, but never fully explained? If bridging the "two cultures" of school and university is difficult, what techniques might best work to help fledgling partnerships develop and succeed? How are Project graduates handling state-mandated standards and testing and still remaining true to the philosophy of the NWP?

So we must return where we began. The NWP is clearly a complex and personal experience, one that is difficult to fully comprehend. One wonders whether any book could capture the experience, but perhaps this challenge might best be met by researchers and practitioners working together on a thorough study of the processes and their impact on participants. And while there remain many important questions about the Project, this book certainly provides some intriguing and helpful explanations and adds to the research base on NWP. Many more such studies are needed to explain why it works so well.

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