

Part III



Writing Group Three: *Designing Writing Programs*



Social Revision

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Our writing group was in a unique position in relation to the others involved in our larger inquiry community because we each came to the project with drafts of our essays in hand. All of us had previously attended an Advanced Writing Institute at our National Writing Project site, where we had written the initial versions of our essays. Therefore, when we joined the new writing group assembled as part of this project's community, we first had to establish a comfort level with our new readers—a step which required letting go of the strong sense of ownership we were already feeling for our drafts.

This crucial step involved getting to know each other better before immersing ourselves in shared revision. Although we had spent time together during previous NWP programs, we had never had the opportunity to work together on the more intimate level that a writing group requires. Before we could feel comfortable sharing our writing, we had to build a level of trust that led us into becoming a team of writers. It was after we reached that familiarity that we were able to work together on refining our essays.

In hindsight, we think it's important that all three of us recognized and explicitly strategized ways of addressing the need to establish a trusting community first. At the time, we didn't take note of the fact that this move was such a big part of what made our work successful. But now, in retrospect, we realize that one factor enabling our group was a shared belief in collaboration—a value fostered in part by our NWP site affiliation. Specifically, all of us already had a sense of belonging to a larger writing community of teachers, and that made establishing this new small group easier.

In any case, we first set out to create a comfortable atmosphere for sharing our writing. This effort included seemingly simple but important things such as choosing central meeting places that had a social feel (e.g., restaurants on a town square). At the start of our sessions, we would devote time to getting to know each other better beyond the context of our writing task, and we even explicitly noted ways we were doing so, such as sharing stories from our home life. Overall, we devoted substantial time during our meetings to creating a deep mutual respect for each other's work and for ourselves as people as well as professionals. As a result of this commitment, we became increasingly comfortable presenting our thoughts and writing to the group, because each of us trusted that we would be heard with an understanding ear.

While building a comfortable space for interaction was crucial, so were other protocols more directly linked to the revision process. One rule we set early on was PQP—praise, question, polish. This positive approach to giving constructive criticism affirmed our commitment to valuing each other as well as the work. We always began by pointing to strengths in the piece we were discussing before moving on to asking questions and making suggestions for improvement.

Another protocol that we established was exchanging our drafts via email before our get-togethers. Typically, we sent our drafts to each other at least a week before the writing group meeting. This strategy gave us a chance to read the material carefully before the in-person discussions, thus having the chance to formulate a thoughtful response ahead of time.

Interestingly, although we had studied the drafts before our meetings, we still read them aloud once we came together as a group, and we responded verbally to those readings, even if we had made margin notes as well. At the end of the meeting, we would pass along the copies, with our notes, to the essay author. A related practice that yielded major benefits was talking through ideas in a global, exploratory way, including considering philosophical questions about teaching. In this case, our broad-based discussions led us to recognize that all three of us were writing about writing programs—how to design and refine them. Seeing this common framework in our pieces helped us to new thinking about our individual essays and about our teaching practices.

One other key protocol we used was to end each meeting by thinking together about what was accomplished—what made the discussion successful and/or unsuccessful. Reflecting out loud, explicitly, on this point led us to continually refine our practices for sharing and also carried over into other venues. (Along those lines, in the summer of 2005, when Andy and Vicki team-taught a week-long staff development course for a school district, they were able to draw on their formative evaluations of their own writing group's protocols to shape the planning for establishing writing groups in their class.)

Looking back, we realize that the protocols we used, in and of themselves, were important. Because we did things like sharing drafts before meetings, and because we established predictable patterns for responding (like the PQP), we knew what to expect. As a result, our group meetings ran efficiently, and we maintained our comfort level with each other and with the process.

Sharing our work led each of us to valuable “ah-ha” moments, both in our individual pieces of writing and in our ability to use writing groups in other contexts. One of the many positive aspects of working with a small writing group is that the members of the group begin to gain a sense of shared ownership for all the composing being done in the group. Ideas generated in

the group stimulate reflection and revision. Now, Andy says, he understands the need to always have “another set of eyes to help you out.” And Leslie points to her realization that all writers share a common bond—that they can relate to each other on the basis of how challenging writing can be. With that in mind, while we’ve used different specific practices in other groups we’ve joined since this one, we are always careful to set up and continually refine protocols for managing the process of sharing and responding. For instance, when Vicki enrolled in a graduate program in professional writing, she drew on her experience in our writing group to offer suggestions for how her classmates could workshop effectively. And when she later joined a writing group of professional authors from outside school, she immediately felt comfortable because of her experiences with our group.

The knowledge we have gained from working in this small writing group has proven to be invaluable to our teaching as well. After collaborating over a period of time with our group, we understood our teaching better and were able to reflect upon and revise our work in the classroom just as we revise and edit our writing. As Leslie says, this work is “never done.”

Perhaps most important, participating in this particular group—one in which all three of us successfully refined writing about our teaching of writing—led us to appreciate the power of writing groups as havens for learning. Our small reflective group was a protected, semi-public forum where, as authors, we were able to gauge the response of some supportive readers before bringing our writing into a more public light. As we move these essays from that protected forum, we feel confident about doing so because our group helped us see ourselves as good writers with something valuable to say to other educators. We now view ourselves in a different professional light than in the past. Vicki may have said it best: “I feel that by writing about my teaching and talking about my writing with other professionals, I have gained a deeper understanding of my practice and my philosophy of teaching. I have gained passion, and more importantly, I have the conviction and the knowledge to back up my teaching.” For all of us, the source of this new confidence in ourselves was the work of our group. We were able to give each other genuine help with our writing, and through that process we all opened our eyes to the power of collaboration.

