

## Part IV



### *Re-viewing Writing Groups at Work*

In the three pieces for this section, we show how our writing groups' work can be situated within larger frameworks for professionalization. First, in "Reading Across Writing Groups," we share examples of project participants responding to drafts being written by colleagues who were not in their own writing groups, but who were part of the community of practice supporting all of us. Second, in "Writing with Our Eyes Open," we offer reports from a team of "first public readers"—a group of educators affiliated with our National Writing Project site whom we invited to review an early draft of our book manuscript. Third, we provide a retrospective narrative on the stages through which our overarching inquiry into writing groups and communities of practice progressed; we position our experiences within a context of scholarship on writing to learn and on successful communities of practice; and we make some recommendations to teachers who want to build on our work.





## Reading Across Writing Groups

Linda Stewart, Renee Kaplan, and Deborah Kramb

In “Reading Across Writing Groups,” we provide examples of written responses produced when members of our community of practice first began to read drafts being prepared by writers working in groups other than their own.

This was an important step in building our confidence as writers. We were moving from the still-relatively-private, safe space of our writing groups to a more public arena, with a reader who was encountering our written text for the first time—but who knew something about our working process, since that reader was part of our larger community of practice. Significantly, during this draft-swapping stage, readers tended to respond to our texts in part by describing their own perspective on our topic, asking questions that may not have emerged in our writing groups, and using their reading to revisit their own essays’ content. This cross-group reading helped us situate our thinking in a broader context, encouraging us to recognize our essays as more than stories of personal experience. After receiving this round of feedback, we discussed the responses in our writing groups and used them to guide additional revision.

The examples below, when read alongside the published essays, show some of the ways our community of practice was shaping work in the smaller, more intimate writing groups. (See also discussion of this exchange-drafts phase in the introduction to Part II, where Renee Kaplan, Sarah Robbins, and Linda Stewart describe trading responses with Vicki and Deborah.)

### Linda Stewart’s Response to Vicki Walker’s Draft

Vicki,

*Because I’m not sure whether I’m to be reflecting on my own practices after reading your piece or providing feedback to you, I am attempting to do both.*

Reading your essay about collaborating with your colleague Ann to explore how to developing children’s writing abilities through images recalls the experiences Sarah and I had as we worked together to accomplish the same thing at the university level. While we may be teaching different ages, there are many commonalities in our approaches. The evolution of your understanding your practices and how they intersect with theory that became apparent through your discussions with Ann are similar to our experience. Your introduction and development of both how to read images for content and then for “authorial technique” (or artistic style) parallels our use of film clips to illustrate content

and theme. The shift you note from teacher-centered to student-centered authority as students gain confidence corresponds to our classrooms. Also, keeping writing at the heart of your practice is consistent in your work and ours. (I'm also realizing as I write this that I can't talk about "my" classroom, but "our" classroom—as if Sarah and I were somehow in the same room!)

One of your practices as you developed your "narrative-making program" through wordless books that shouldn't be overlooked is the importance of talk—between you and Ann and among the students as you conferenced with them. Tom Newkirk and Peter Elbow both emphasize the importance of talk (as do many other educators) in the classroom, and your essay reminded me of that research.

I wondered, when I read your realization that students "had a sense of oral narrative structure mastery that was ahead of what they could produce in print," if that intersected with child development theories (e.g. Piaget). I haven't read many of those texts in so long, that I don't remember. But what strikes me after reading your essay, is how talking through the pictures, or "storying" pictures is such a central component of bridging the gap between image and text, whether the students are eight or eighteen. Fascinating insight. I will try to incorporate that strategy more consciously in my own classroom.

Similar to your work, I used the textbook *Seeing and Writing* for several semesters in my composition class that fuses with your intent to use "wordless books to drive instruction." Your essay reminded me of two essays in that text: 1) John Berger's first essay in his book *Ways of Seeing* that states, "seeing comes before words"; and 2) Scott McCloud's "Show and Tell" which is the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter in *Understanding Comics*. Perhaps comic frames are too sophisticated for elementary school, but I wondered about their uses in your class.

I loved seeing into your class a bit—the description of you sitting at the first grade table; the student's comment, "we 'did' that one yesterday," or how one student internalized your instruction, adding "Pizza Delivery" to the image—all made your experience very immediate and intimate to this reader. I also appreciated how you laid out your plan: 1) build on their skills; 2) use literature as a model; 3) extend their writing abilities. That approach works well at any level for any type of assignment.

I found myself wanting more details about specific student's work and how they successfully moved from the visual to the verbal. You mentioned how you worked with them to develop details for their tripartite narratives, and I was eager to hear how they did so. You were honest about how some students weren't developmentally ready for this type of sophisticated instruction, but how you patiently nudged them along. I've certainly had this same experience, and when I'm enthusiastic about a particular

approach, I have to remind myself that while some students leap into the process, others chug along.

When you talk about moving from reading (images) to writing (with images and text) you discuss techniques. I wondered if you were referring to what you called “authoring techniques” and if you define that as both artistic and writerly? I also quibbled with the notion that “all stories have a beginning, middle, and end.” Because we’re trying to validate diverse student backgrounds and the ways they tell stories, the triptych model isn’t necessarily valid for “all” stories. Maybe “most” would be better. To explain, one of my Korean students told a story of her mother washing clothes with the pebbles in a stream near her home. The story was heavy on description, but there was no moral, no beginning, middle or end. Of all the stories told in the class that day, hers was the one that provoked the most interest and admiration among her classmates. It was a good lesson for me that different cultures have different ways of telling stories. In fact, as I write this now, I wonder—are there wordless books for children using Chinese or Japanese or Vietnamese symbols or images?

As you can see—reading your essay has not only raised awareness of how sound teaching practices work from first grade to grad school, but has given me several angles to explore in my work with visual literacy and its connection to writing. Thanks, Vicki, for the opportunity to read your work.

*~Linda Stewart*

### Excerpts from Renee’s Response to Deborah Kramb’s Draft

I was eager to read your essay on balancing real life day-to-day situations of teaching, studying, and family. I, too, feel the crunch of time to complete all my projects, and I was hoping to find a cure for dealing with all my “extra” endeavors. The cure wasn’t there, but your essay gave me hope from a professional colleague. I am hoping to pursue National Board Certification myself, so there is another tantalizer to this essay for me. Even though you teach first grade and I am in middle school, I will re-read your essay throughout my own journey for National Board Certification.

First, as I began to read your introduction, I thought about the process of our teacher inquiry community. The essay clearly shows the importance of teacher professional identity and working with a cohort group. . . .

Moreover, I was immediately captivated with the strong opening—a grandmother comparing life to a juggling act with four balls: work, family, integrity, and health. As I read your topic and sub-topics, I was excited

because I saw the essay was going to be written as a play. I cheered, "What an innovative idea." Then I realized that the essay is divided into three acts, as though you are relating your struggles and triumphs as a teacher to your audience. I could actually visualize you sitting on a stool in the middle of a stage and telling your story to other educators....

Here are some points in the essay where I was thinking and questioning. Some of your reflections are especially helpful as I re-visit my own project. They will help me revise.

*"Ironically, teaching is a learning process. I don't believe a good teacher is ever finished learning."* Yes, teachers are lifelong learners in teaming, sharing achievements of students and with students, reading the latest research in professional journals, attending conferences, and creating and implementing programs to improve student learning.

*"I believe all students can learn and it is my challenge to find the key to teaching them....I make goals for individuals, based upon the goals of the grade level, but not restricted by them."* You give examples to support your premise, and I want to adapt this approach in my own middle school classroom [and in writing about it].

*"Now my students and I learn together."* I see the . . . sound teaching principle [and how] my own essay focuses on students and myself learning together. . . .

I admire you for sharing your passion for teaching and your recent past challenges with the rest of us. You note that sharing lessons is not enough, but sharing written reflections and the analysis of successes and failures will encourage others to take risks in their own paths for professional development. . . .

Your juggling act worked for you, but it appears to be a change of balance and sometimes one of the four balls is heavier for awhile, and the other three must equal it in weight. I do not know if all four are ever going to be equally balanced. I presume the key is to empower oneself to stabilize areas of management during extreme shifts in differentiation?

Your essay is encouraging and [shows] a teacher's struggle for professional growth through...written reflection and working with cohorts in both small and large groups.

### Deborah Kramb's Response to Renee Kaplan's Draft

When Renee [started to give] a synopsis of her essay [at an inquiry community meeting], I only half listened. Renee teaches eighth-grade gifted students and I teach first grade students and her subject was a study of Holocaust survivors. It didn't occur to me that we would have anything in

common other than teachers struggling to teach children how to write. I totally enjoyed reading Renee's essay, however. I found myself reading it at several different levels simultaneously: as a teacher sympathizing with her struggle through a difficult challenge, as an eighth grade student sitting in her classroom and as a friend, pulling for her to be successful and amazed that she would try something so complex. I read the essay as I would a good work of fiction, impatiently moving quickly to find out what happened!

Reading the essay as a teacher, I looked for evidence of good instruction that I might emulate. When Renee reflected on looking at the student's work with questions—saying: "I asked myself if the prompts called for students to construct knowledge,"—I imagined how I could use prompts in my own teaching of writing. When she spoke of adjusting assignments for individual interests, I applauded her... And, I was so impressed that her reflections helped her focus her objectives when the project started to grow beyond her expectations. That was a lesson I would remember!

But, I kept slipping back into my past self, as an eighth grader faced with a teacher who suggested such a project. How would I have felt? As soon as I read the students reflections I became one of them. Yes, I would be reluctant. As an eighth grader, or even now, would I feel comfortable approaching the subject? I grew along with the students as Renee quoted their reflections. I tried to imagine how they felt about the fact their teacher was modeling journaling and expressing her doubts and confusion. (Did she edit what she read to the students, I wonder?) I suffered along with the students when the project became too big to be finished in a year. I understood completely their conflicting feelings.

And then I became Renee's friend—rationalizing that the students would learn a good life lesson. If something is to be very good it takes time and a lot of effort. I identified and sympathized with her when the students didn't always react as she had assumed they would. She had taken such a big risk! But, I knew she wouldn't give up either—and I could hear her struggle in her journal writings as she mulled over what to do to help the reluctant students or faced the challenge of doing things she had never done before. I knew how uncomfortable she felt. I've been there. I could identify. I cheered her on, hoping there would be a way around the problems, but I also worried that she had taken on too much—and that her high expectations would not be met. More than once I asked myself if I would have taken on such a challenge.

Renee and I both have the experience of the Writing Project behind us and I think that influence acted as a safety net for both of us... We have struggled with our own writing in the program, supported by our summer institute writing group—and the groups for this project.... Because of her

experience, she shared her perceived failures as well as her hopes, without hesitation, or concern about what her readers thought of her. As mine did for me, her writing group gave her positive feedback and restored her confidence. I am sure they acted as a sounding board for her ideas, helping her to clarify her goals because that is what the small writing groups are best at!

When Renee [recently] shared her project and essay with our community of practice, she spoke with confidence and clarity. I could hear her working out details of the essay as she spoke. In describing the details to us, in working to help us understand, she kept herself on track. In the safe environment of the inquiry community she could express her thoughts, and our questions guided the course of her essay. Our interest in the subject reflected the audience she was writing for. As a group we reveled in her struggle and in her successes. We learned from her mistakes and her sharing of them. We are all winners....

The closing [reflection] expressed the support that the writing group gave...to the development of the essay and even [to] the lessons in the unit.... Personally I think the essay was captivating because of...including Renee's and the students' reflections. It is interesting that the fact of writing an essay that could be published would affect the assignments for the students! (Good or not?)

She stated some broad information that would help another teacher in planning a similar unit... I was impressed that her sharing her own writing enabled the students to move into honest journaling themselves. This also happened in my small writing group among the adults. My reluctance to go out on a limb was overcome with matter-of-fact modeling by other members of the group. I too realize now how important teaming of colleagues is and how motivating support and praise can be. I know that will be in my mind as I face my next class of students.