

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.



Writing With Our Eyes Open: A Collaborative Response to *Teachers' Writing Groups*

Zsa Boykin, Toby Emert, Sandra Grant, and Scott Smoot

Establishing a Process for Responding

We have a confession to make. When we first received the editors' invitation to "respond" to the manuscript of this book, we did not envision ourselves as contributing authors. We teachers took "responding" to mean "editing" and "encouraging." We thought we would be, like you, readers on the outside looking in on others' writing, offering our observations and our critiques. What we discovered, however, is that we could participate in the colloquy that is this book. Our purpose in this chapter is to draw you in, too.

The four of us had never worked closely prior to our first coffee-and-donuts meeting in the Writing Center at Kennesaw State University. Sandra, Zsa, and Scott had met at National Writing Project workshops; Toby was new to the others. We had gotten to know each other a little better through e-mail correspondence, where we shared unfiltered responses to the manuscript of this book. Those tentative first reactions via e-mail were a good icebreaker at our first meeting, because we all had questions about each other's responses.

As we explained our observations, we discovered that we had each reacted according to our different roles in education. Sandra told how the book resonated with her experiences of studying educational leadership. Zsa prefaced one of her comments by saying that she read as a parent as well as a teacher. Scott found encouragement in these essays for his interest in publishing teacher research essays. Toby looked at the book for its use in instructing the undergraduate education majors in his classroom. When someone said that this book seemed to address multiple constituencies in the field of education, Scott wondered aloud if we might write responses as personal letters, each addressed to one of those constituencies. We decided to try the idea.

Though we wrote separate letters, we still collaborated. Thanks to the internet, we could post drafts on an electronic bulletin board and read each others' responses on e-mail. In our next face-to-face meeting at a book store coffee shop, we asked each other for clarifications, and we heard our own

ideas said back to us, sometimes more succinctly. We began to establish our own mini-community of writers, thus joining the inquiry community of this book. Forming a writing group was as easy, informal, and enjoyable as that. We became part of this book, not just in the sense of adding a chapter, but in the sense of trying out the process it models.

Now it's your turn. Read each of the letters that follow. Whatever your role in education, you will likely find entry for yourself to this continuing conversation, becoming a part of this book as we did.

An Open Letter to Classroom Teachers
from Scott Smoot,
Middle School Teacher and Published Teacher Author

Dear Classroom Teachers:

You know at least one story from your classroom that could change lives. Teachers across America need to hear it. Still, like me, you hesitate to write it. You dread the research to validate your idea, or you prefer to use your creative energy for your students, or you fear rejection. This book has a message for us: begin now to write; it's less daunting and more urgent than you think. You won't find that message in any one chapter; it emerges in the story behind every chapter.

The real starting point for every essay here was a single question: How can I better serve my students? Other questions follow, as different teacher-researchers wonder "what if?" or worry "how come?" Just asking moves us toward the answer. I know, because twenty years ago, a professor of mine laid aside his syllabus and asked me instead to consider the three hardest problems I still faced in my own classroom after four years' teaching. My proposing solutions to my own problems was his only assignment. He and his library were resources open to me for ideas, but experience and imagination supplied the bulk of my answers. Those three essays I wrote then had immediate impact on my teaching, and they have informed my teaching ever since.

In the authors' reflections that frame each essay in this book, we're reminded how these teacher-researchers pushed themselves and each other beyond easy answers. Leslie Walker describes her classroom where students are engaged and "getting it." We expect the rest of the essay to tell us how to recreate her success. Instead, she asks more critical questions, then visits colleagues' classrooms to view their very different approaches. She reforms her own teaching. But Leslie is a teacher of such integrity and persistence that even good results are again open to question. Her dialogue with colleagues helps her to draw conclusions

from painful failures. Some of that dialogue happens in the text of her essay, but it also happens outside the text, in her writing group. We, too, can find friendly insight and encouragement in writing groups.

Besides what writing can do for you and your classroom, there's the potential for teacher writing groups to break the grip of dumb inertia in our schools and systems. *I'm thinking not of the impact of writing on those who read it, but the impact on those who do the writing.* This isn't your usual kind of writing about your own school. I'm used to reporting on what my school does, and I'm used to hearing questions posed—then answered—from a podium. I'd like to see what happens when colleagues set out in small cooperative groups to find answers to the questions “what if,” “how come,” and “how can we better serve our students?” When they push each other past the easy answers, will change be effected in their classrooms? Will their results leaven the entire building?

Let us practice what we preach, and write to learn.

Yours,

W. Scott Smoot
Middle School Teacher
The Walker School
Marietta, Georgia

**An Open Letter to School Administrators
from Sandra Grant,
Teacher, Former Executive, and Former Administrator**

Dear Principals and Inservice Coordinators:

Educational leaders are constantly aware of the fact that communication is the sound and logical foundation on which to build success. As a member of the business sector for many years, I strongly believe that one of the key components of effective leadership is communication through mentoring. The most vibrant use of this book for me personally would be as a mentoring tool. Mentoring can be beneficial to the principal as well as to the teacher. Mentoring can be multi-faceted. We can use it as an evaluative tool; as problem solving for teachers and for the school; and for gaining affirmation for teachers as they work together in writing groups.

Being instructional leaders who have a strong emphasis on student achievement, we can clearly see the need to give the teachers under our

tutelage more time to reflect on their specialty. By using the collaborative writing group model, we will find that improvement comes through sharing, reflecting, and writing. A teacher's performance as we see it in a forty-five minute observation may not give the true picture of what that teacher is truly capable of accomplishing. After observing our teachers in the classroom, we should allow them to spend time reflecting on the lesson and writing down their thoughts on how their teaching of this particular lesson affected their students. We could take this even further by allowing teachers at our schools approximately four to eight weeks to form writing groups to talk and get feedback on their written evaluation piece. Teachers could work together in writing groups towards a solution that would improve teaching and learning in the classroom.

Even with budget constraints and high stakes testing looming before us, we can all benefit from this type of participative alliance. We should allow our teachers time to work together in writing groups to achieve a higher level of performance and empowerment. There may be a litany of reasons why there would be "no time" for this type of professionalization. However, we can and should be creative in providing writing group opportunities for our teachers during pre-planning, teacher workdays, post-planning, and even teacher retreats.

Teachers relish support, respect, and cooperation. Using this book, teachers can create their own lessons to learn, strategies to borrow, and plans to improve teaching. The overriding hope of all participants in this book is the desire that their students should benefit from similar opportunities. Communication and trust became the key ingredient for the success of each writing group in this project. Suffice it to say that their determination to have open and honest communication about their essays is carrying over now in the authors' teaching. Administrators cannot effectively mentor every teacher in our schools, one-on-one. Writing groups can allow us to delegate some of our mentoring responsibilities to groups by allowing them to in effect become mentors for each other. As we mentor our teachers through writing groups, we can build communities of unreserved honesty and sincere expression.

Sincerely,

Sandra M. Grant
Educational Leader

An Open Letter to Parents and Student Advocates
from Zsa Boykin,
Middle School Teacher and Parent of Elementary Students

Dear Parents and Student Advocates:

As a veteran teacher I invite you to step inside the minds of the educators whose classrooms appear in this book. You will have an opportunity to experience intriguing lessons and also to develop an appreciation for teachers valuing the art of reflection as a necessary tool of their profession.

Parents, try this: at the next parent/teacher conference, casually ask your child's teacher if the process of reflecting is a part of his or her lesson preparation. As a parent myself, I have occasionally stood in the kitchen interrogating my daughter with questions such as, "Why does the teacher want you to do this? How does this homework relate to the content you are learning?" Though I really didn't expect my six-year-old to answer me, I'd like to have the courage to ask her teacher about the literacy development principle behind certain assignments. Go ahead and share my story. Use me as an example. When your child's teacher invites you to ask questions, say, "I have a friend who forever helps her daughter with cute, but nonsensical homework assignments. Contrary to that scenario, I want my child *engaged in learning* even when he or she has fun completing non-traditional assignments. So, could you share with me how you value the art of reflection as a necessary tool for creating and modifying exemplary lessons in your subject area? And how do you teach children to reflect?"

Let's take reflection to yet another level. Some teachers do write about and discuss their classroom experiences with their colleagues. As other professionals, such as doctors, attorneys, and even athletic coaches have benefited from collegial collaboration, these teachers have joined the league of practitioners aiming to solve mysteries, uncover facts, and create strategies that will optimize their students' learning. Teachers' writing groups promote this kind of collaboration. As you read this book, with such community building as a goal, feel free to delve into the mindset of our ten educators. You will find that each teacher writing in this volume represents one you would want for your own child. And you'll become an advocate for other teachers to have similar opportunities for the benefit of more learners.

Sincerely,

Zsa G. Boykin

**An Open Letter to College and University Professors
Preparing Future Classroom Teachers
from Dr. Toby Emert,
Assistant Professor of English and English Education**

Dear Teacher Educators:

Imagine, if you will, a text designed specifically to elicit critical questions from its readers, not simply to detail conclusions—a book that, in some regards, asks its readers to respond, to add to the stories, to create a dialogue with the book's authors. I grant you that concept hits somewhat outside the boundaries we, in the current educational culture, are accustomed to. We have been taught to expect the stories we read and those we tell to have clear beginnings, clear rising exposition, and clear conclusions. And this expectation about stories spills over into our classrooms where, we are told, we should be paying spectacular attention to conclusions—to the assessment of student performance as it relates to mandated objectives. What we know about the real work that goes on in successful classrooms, however, is that, if nothing else, it is messy, unpredictable, and process-oriented.

This collection of essays by teachers who represent a cross-section of backgrounds, experience, and expertise acknowledges the messiness in our work—in fact, in some ways, they celebrate it. When I was asked to join a group of three other colleagues to respond to this manuscript, I accepted the invitation because I am committed to the idea of helping teachers critique their practices. I was intrigued with the idea of teachers collaborating to form writing groups. In my professional life, which includes work as a theatre director, a classroom teacher, a career counselor, a university administrator, and a professor, I've seen only a few teams who seemed to understand some of the nuances of sharing both responsibilities and rewards. This book gives us the stories of teachers who made a purposeful choice to come together and to share the work of crafting something significant, timely, and useful. In doing so, they came to the project with an eye toward nurturing their own professional growth and an eye toward creating models of collaboration that others may wish to emulate. In short, what the editors of this book have assembled is a diverse set of portraits of teacher-teams working, writing, collaborating, thinking, and, perhaps most importantly, reflecting.

Reflection became a key component in the work that each small group did for the project. Two themes appear frequently in the book: the need for more time to reflect and the need for a structure that supports the reflective analysis of classroom practices. The teacher-writers acknowledge that as they

engaged in the process of responding to each other's essays, they began to trust that process. Carol Harrell, another English Education professor, pointed out when I talked with her about her experience participating in the book project, "I didn't trust the idea of offering my writing to others for feedback before this experience. Now, I understand. I'll never look at my classroom in quite the same way again."

The essays in the book stand as evidence that the response group process helped these teacher/writers to internalize the idea of critical reflection. The editors purposefully chose to expose the architecture of the project, inviting other educational professionals to adapt the idea. Using the structure of the process, as outlined in the introduction and in the conclusion, other teacher cohorts in other settings could embark on a similar journey. The book serves as a model for teachers-in-training and for in-service teachers who wish to investigate—with commitment and verve—their own practices through the process of thoughtful collaboration with like-minded colleagues. The book invites us, as we should also invite our students, to re-examine what we think we know about our world and to respond, with passion, to the "messiness" we discover.

Sincerely yours,

Toby Emert, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of English and English Education

Reflection

And now another confession: we surprised ourselves by how quickly we began to generate workable ideas for a chapter responding to this book. Early in our conversations, we began to make connections to our own teaching practices and philosophies. As our conversations extended, we continued to note our "ah-ha" moments. As for the other authors in this project, we found our collaborative writing opened up more dialogue toward shared professionalization.

We talked about the various settings where we work and how we thought the idea of writing groups could energize teachers who often feel that, despite the deluge of information from a number of agencies and the daily contact with hundreds of students, they plan and deliver instruction in relative isolation. Impromptu conversations in the hallway or the teachers' lounge or the lunchroom do generate new instructional methods or strategies, but generally, teachers have little time for serious reflection on their practices. We were excited about the idea of educators collaborating in an effort to discover how to celebrate the extraordinary moments in their classrooms and how to find ways to encourage more of those moments.

*We thought that idea was revolutionary—that if more teachers engaged in critical conversations about their practices with an eye toward **writing** about what they learned from those conversations, they would come to think of themselves more as professionals—highly trained and extremely thoughtful practitioners who view their work as vital, generative, and specialized. We realize that most teachers are not expected to think of themselves as professionals in the ways physicians, attorneys, and executives do. In contrast, the teachers who participated in the writing groups described in this book expressed major changes in their attitudes about the roles they play in their classrooms. The reflecting and the writing and the discussing validated their efforts and encouraged them to continue to learn and adapt, essentially becoming the “life-long learners” we often say we want our students to become.*

Like the teachers who wrote the other chapters in this book, we found the very process of meeting, writing, talking, and creating a product together encouraged us to expand our individual perspectives. Our group process influenced our individual processes. Our group talk foregrounded our internal dialogues. Our group feedback to the writing each of us was doing encouraged us to revise both the words on the page and the thoughts behind them.

The work we engaged in and the work of the teachers whose articles make up the book mirror the kind of work we want our students to do. These teacher-writers found a wealth of ideas that are influencing who they are in their classrooms and learned, by practice and through feedback, that structured reflection has its strong rewards. This collaboration gave the four of us an opportunity to do that—to begin a dialogue about possibilities—generated from the writing we did.

We discovered that this process opens and enlightens; it touches and personalizes; it instructs and inspires. Isn't that what we want our teaching ultimately to do?