Part II

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Writing Group Two:
Looking Closely at Classroom Practices

Reading to Write; "Reading" the Classroom to Re-vise Learning

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The two essays that follow are linked both by our participation in a three-member writing group and by common themes that developed through discussions of our teaching as we shared our writing, in person and online. Our collaborative process was shaped by several factors, but especially by the fact that we were all three trying to write about teaching that was still very much in-process. While we were writing our essays, we were also in "draft mode" with our teaching: we were "reading" classroom practices that were still unfolding. That is, during the year when we were meeting to develop plans for the essays and (later) to compose our various drafts, we were still in the midst of the actual curriculum initiatives we were trying to document. Hence, our writing group shaped not only the essays' content but also the specific teaching experiences that are now recorded here. For instance, through our group collaboration, we all three gained a heightened awareness of the benefits associated with having students create written reflections about their learning processes, so we all began to allow more protected class time for this type of activity. In addition, we all read about and had our students use multi-genre forms for reporting on research. On that topic and others, we continually exchanged ideas about books and articles to read, as well as stories about what was going on in our classrooms. Looking back, we now find it difficult to identify which of us first came up with specific ideas that worked their way into the teaching and writing all three of us were sharing.

To work together, we did have to overcome some obstacles. At first, we had a fourth group member. Very early on, she decided that she was not ready to write about her topic for this publication, so our team shrank to three. Linda and Sarah were co-authoring an essay, so our group actually had only two pieces on which to collaborate, and that proved to be both beneficial and challenging. With only two essays in progress, we could read the pieces very closely. But we did lack the stimulation some of the larger groups had from reading more drafts all at once. (Trading drafts with members of other writing groups later on in the project did alleviate this problem, as we will outline below.)

Even after our group became smaller, we still faced logistical challenges. Our schedules never seemed compatible. In the initial stages, we couldn't

seem to find a day that would work for all three of use to meet. Therefore, several times, we met in pairs rather than as a whole group of three. We would summarize these "pair-share" discussions via a whole-group email, so that all three of us could still stay informed. And soon we realized that the small size of our group could be advantageous: we could "meet online" simply by exchanging emailed drafts.

Indeed, after we had tried this approach, we discovered that it worked well for us. All three of us enjoy writing, and we were excited about our essays. Therefore, we didn't need to meet in person so frequently to keep our energy up. All of us enjoy reading about teaching, so we found it exciting every time a new revision appeared in our digital mailboxes, and we established a protocol of responding promptly to emailed drafts. Also, all of us are interested in technology-enhanced writing, so we were enthusiastic about experimenting with commenting and editing features of Word for Windows that might move our essays along. In the early drafting stages, we would write response notes directly into the word file we received online, putting queries in brackets and suggested changes in blue. Where we thought the text could be condensed, we used word's "strikeout" function. We also wrote longer, global responses at the end of draft files or in the email "box," including praise and questions.

Just as when we respond to student writing in written form, we found that our emailed notes on our colleagues' texts required us to think about giving feedback as a kind of art form in itself. We learned there is a fine balance between offering too much or too little help. We learned to ask good questions. We learned ways to help writers revise without heaping false praise or making caustic comments.

Below are excerpts from an online response sent to Renee—i.e., segments from one of Renee's very early drafts, with Sarah's and Linda's suggestions and questions in bold type, just as Renee would have seen it as a word attachment. (Sarah and Linda had synthesized their responses before emailing them, in this case.)

Sharing Journal Reflections of Inspiration and Remembrance
[We really like the title!]

"If you haven't attempted new avenues to incorporate technology into your lessons, now is the time to try," urged my middle school principal. **[great to open with a quote!]** I do believe that statement. Integrating technology with curriculum standards will bring harmony to my students' learning, and it will expand knowledge and skill development. . . .

Being an experienced language arts teacher and a national Holocaust educator, I decided to develop a project to instruct my eighth grade ~~literacy class of~~ gifted students on how to integrate their knowledge of the Holocaust with first-person accounts of local survivors. ~~In short,~~ I envisioned that the students would interview survivors, listen to first-hand oral testimonies, digitally photograph and video these testimonies, and compose interview narratives. This **would** become a community-based project involving students, parents, local survivors, Apple Computer, Inc., the school's Partner in Education, and other professionals from universities and state and federal agencies. **[super background info in this paragraph!]**

The procedures of instruction prior to actual meetings and interviews with survivors involved a historical study of the Holocaust, excerpts of multi-genre literature, a literature study of a Holocaust memoir *All But My Life* by Gerda Weisssmann Klein, researching first person accounts of interviews on the internet websites at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and viewing of Holocaust related videos. Journal writings were to be incorporated and shared throughout the lessons. The learning process involved **connecting** the **Georgia** State Standards **[for social studies? We're unclear about this link]** and the eighth grade language arts curriculum. **[Do you need to provide a "map" of your essay structure here—something like: In the sections of this essay that follow, to re-visit this teaching experience, I will present my own journal entries from the unit, along with representative samples from my students' reflections.]**

The finished essay has a different opening than that in the excerpt above, because, as Renee and her students worked together throughout the semester, their journaling gradually became more important than the technology focus with which she began. But some elements in her early draft remained in place through further revisions, and the suggestion to begin thinking about the essay's structure did encourage her to consider various organizational ideas—both for her essay and for the classroom project itself.

Once we saw how well our online responses to each other were working, Sarah and Linda did more of their collaborative writing by dividing up sections of their essay, working on them individually, and sending segments to each other by email, with each author commenting on the other's most recent drafting. Renee continued to email global questions about her text to Sarah and Linda, as well as sending whole drafts as attachments.

However, despite the role that online responding was playing in our group process, talking remained central to the group's writing. For Sarah's and Linda's co-authored essay, talking included extended discussions we had

prior to revising our introduction and body based on making a new outline for our essay's structure. Having to articulate ideas about the piece's direction to each other at this stage clarified the narrative's argument and organizational agenda. Later, moving further into revision, talking was often the means for negotiating points of style—even individual word choice. Talking also highlighted gaps in our thinking or weaknesses in detail. Like our drafting, the revision process proceeded most smoothly when writing separately was complemented by personal discussions.

A highlight of our writing group process was a dinner to celebrate the completion of our first rough drafts. This occasion was actually the first time that Renee and Linda had met face-to-face. After that, our email exchanges and our cross-text editing became even more comfortable, detailed, and lively. But from the very beginning, an important trait of our collaboration was our willingness to be honest with each other and to accept constructive criticism as well as praise. For example, in a talk session early in the project, Renee tactfully rejected Sarah's tentative idea for an essay topic: Renee recommended that Sarah consider a classroom-oriented essay rather than writing about how to create ethnographies. Renee was urging Sarah to think about our anticipated cross-level readers and the interest they would have in teaching. Small though our group was, it embodied that cross-level audience—a fact which shaped our conversations, our writing, and the reading we continued throughout our revision stages.

Re-reading our essays now, we are not surprised to see some striking similarities in our classroom stories. Our conversations were shaping our teaching practices. For example, through discussing our drafts, we discovered that writing to learn in the eighth grade can be much like in a college classroom. Our essays also reflect a shared commitment to community-building and studying community life: in the projects described in both of our essays, students researched and wrote about the world outside their classroom, and the experience of "going public" strengthened the sense of community within our classrooms. In spite of the obvious differences between middle schools and universities, as we wrote together, our classrooms became more alike, linked by core concepts about collaborative, reflective writing that all of us were examining (and experimenting with) in our practice. The more we wrote, the more we saw the connecting points when we read each others' texts.

As we moved through multiple revisions, re-reading each others' work remained a crucial element in our group process, but expanding our reading base became important to our writing as well. Members of other writing groups in our community of practice recommended specific research pieces to us. As Renee has pointed out, having others in the project emphasize the

importance of professional reading was significant in itself. In one reflective note she wrote: "It's really helpful to me to BE with people who read. Very few people in my school do. My principal does, and the one other NWP teacher in my building. But through this project, I am truly learning how to use research to support what I'm doing."

For all three of us, a major support to our writing process came from drafts that were being prepared in other writing groups linked to our community of practice. (See "Reading Across Writing Groups" in Part IV.) In reading Vicki Walker's essay, Sarah and Linda were able to recognize some core concepts driving their classroom decision-making. From reading Vicki's text, they were also encouraged to highlight the various *stages* their instructional program was using to shape their students' interactions with visual culture. In reading Deborah Kramb's essay, Renee saw points about professional growth that could be treated more explicitly in her own essay. Reading Deborah's essay also encouraged Renee to work harder on crafting a distinctive writing voice.

Reading the written response pieces we received from others in the inquiry community when they had reviewed our drafts was another key support to our revision. Vicki Walker (who was writing her own "Picture This" essay) read one of Sarah's and Linda's drafts. Vicki's questions prompted them to weave in more details about *how* their students were demonstrating their learning. Deborah Kramb read one of Renee's drafts. (See "Reading Across Writing Groups.") In Deborah's written response, we saw ways Renee could take fuller advantage of student voices in her text, providing additional analysis of their significance.

What advice would we give to other teachers who want to use writing groups to support their professional development? Our group's emphasis on online collaboration meant we were using different strategies than the other teacher-writers involved in this book's community of practice. But there were important commonalities with the other groups as well. One thing we learned is that it's worthwhile to talk about teaching, research, and writing practices as a step toward sharing with a wider audience. Talking to colleagues—and students—and documenting the ideas that emerge from these discussions are ways to begin writing. And it's essential to connect regularly with members of your group—to have a calendar for the work. Perhaps most of all, we learned that reading and writing can go hand in hand to promote professional development. Teachers who want to use writing to grow professionally should study examples of professional writing by teachers—both published pieces and in-process writing that colleagues are doing. Good writers read. Teachers' writing groups provide a powerful way to link reading and writing through collaborative reflection.