



“*The Faraway Stick Cannot Kill the Nearby Snake*”

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Here’s a nod to the obvious. No student enters school with the same abilities, background, opportunities, or even, in many cases, with the same native language as the student at the next desk. This phenomenon does not change over time. Students are still different from one another in grade 2, grade 5, grade 9, and so on, in part because they develop at different rates and along different flight paths. Being in school does not level the playing field. Actually, school curriculum contributes to diversity in learning among students.

We use the word *curriculum* here in a broad sense. It includes all of the experiences children have under the guidance of teachers (Caswell and Campbell, 1935). Curriculum is not just subject matter, nor is it limited to a scope and sequence or a plan. It’s what happens in the classroom—what some scholars call the “operational” curriculum (Posner, 2004). It includes lessons, events (planned and unplanned), activities, accompanying materials, and assessments. As George Posner explains, the operational curriculum “may differ significantly from the official curriculum because teachers tend to interpret it in the light of their own knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes” (2004, p.13).

As almost every educator knows, curriculum, including writing curriculum, is subject to the pendulum phenomenon—ideas about teaching and learning that swing from one approach to

another, leading to wide variations in what goes on in classrooms. For instance, some institutions shape the curriculum in favor of “utilitarian outcomes,” for example, writing to get ready for college; others shape the curriculum in favor of “intellectual growth for its own sake,” for example, using writing to explore new ideas. Some educators advocate for a “uniform curriculum” in which all students learn the same things at the same time, while others advocate for an “individualized” approach, one that encourages students to develop their own interests and choose their own topics for writing (Gardner, 2000). Clearly, such widely differing points of view contribute to wide fluctuations in what students encounter from class to class or school to school. It is not hard to imagine, for example, how an approach to teaching writing that offers choice and accounts for a student’s unique strengths and needs might differ from a program that attempts to run all students through the same mill.

It might be tempting to think that standardizing the curriculum will promote equity. However, prescribing the same over-the-counter treatment for every student dooms many to failure by ignoring the uniqueness of each learner. Rather, we believe *intentional* diversity in curriculum gives students the best chance for success. Indeed, students need curriculum that is sensitive to their individual variations in strengths, abilities, interests, backgrounds, cultures, and so on. It goes without saying that building such a curriculum is a tall order, a next-to-impossible task unless the builder knows the students. Our view is that teachers are best suited to fashion a curriculum that *intentionally* and *purposefully* takes their students into account.

Over the past few years, we have consulted with a number of exemplary teachers to find out what they do in their classrooms and why. Our data include interviews, observations, surveys, written assignments, student writing samples, rubrics, and, in some cases, students’ written reflections on their work. We’ve discovered that these teachers put every lesson through the “my students” test. It’s the test that teachers use to adapt, enliven, bump up, or otherwise tailor the curriculum for the students at hand. This kind of fine tuning is not within the grasp of even the most brilliant policymaker. As suggested by the comment of a village elder in our title, “the faraway stick cannot kill the nearby

snake.” Rather, it is the teacher who knows the nearby students and therefore, who can find the best way for each one to learn.

At the same time, however, “the faraway stick” can play havoc with what teachers need to do for their students, particularly when it comes to writing. Too often teachers run into policies that are unfriendly to teaching writing, that minimize or otherwise distort its place in the curriculum, and that shortchange teacher knowledge and professionalism in the process. In the best of times, writing has a seat at the table in nearly every discipline, for obvious reasons. Scientists write. Historians write. Economists write. Politicians write, sometimes voluminously. In the worst of times, writing mysteriously disappears, nowhere to be seen and often difficult to resurrect.

The amount and kind of attention writing receives in the curriculum varies for other reasons as well—reasons we will examine in the next section:

- ◆ Reading often monopolizes the available time for literacy instruction at the expense of writing.
- ◆ Writing of any length and intellectual substance does not always get the time and sustained attention it requires.
- ◆ How to best teach writing and what to emphasize remains an ongoing debate.

Why Is Writing Curriculum All Over the Map (If It Is on the Map)?

When it comes to writing curriculum, the variety is stunning. Sometimes writing curriculum is ample; at other times it is truncated, or camouflaged, or AWOL entirely.

Reading as the Favored Destination

Clifford (1989) documents the historically “low estate of writing in the schools,” noting that “Years of studies of how classroom time is spent” show that “reading instruction dominates the day.”

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Investigations of secondary schools by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) have repeatedly shown that more time was spent on literature than on all other aspects of the English curriculum *combined* A study of 168 exemplary American high schools during the early 1960s—schools with high state or national reputations—reported that reading (that is, literature) received three and a half times more attention than writing (that is, composition). (1989, p. 28)

But there are certainly other reasons for the fact that writing often plays second fiddle to reading. The most obvious reason is that policymakers influence the scope of teaching in the classroom. During the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era, policy dictated that external, high-stakes assessments focus on reading and mathematics. The results, according to Applebee and Langer (2013), had “disastrous implications for student learning.”

Over the past decade, for example, writing (as well as other subjects) has been deemphasized in response to the focus on reading and mathematics . . . teachers across subject areas . . . have modified their teaching of writing in response to the exams, leaving out research papers, for example, and personal or creative writing in favor of tasks that would be directly assessed. (pp. 179–80)

Narrowing the curriculum means some things get attention and others get tossed aside. As a consequence of NCLB, a whole generation of students was shortchanged when it came to writing.

Writing as a Drive-By

If reading is a favored destination, where does that leave writing? It’s not exactly a pit stop, but it lacks all the characteristics of a desired landing place—somewhere to linger and explore. When Applebee and Langer (2013) observed English classes in twenty schools, they found that in a fifty-minute period “students would have had on average just over 3 minutes of instruction related to explicit writing strategies (the most frequent emphasis observed), or a total of 2 hours and 22 minutes in a 9-week grading period” (p. 22). In another study, Kiuahara, Graham, & Hawken (2009) asked a random sample of high school teachers from across

the United States to tell them about writing instruction in their classrooms:

[T]he teachers said the most common activities that their students engaged in were writing short answer responses to homework, responding to material read, completing worksheets, summarizing material read, writing journal entries, and making lists. Together, these activities involved little extended analysis, interpretation, or writing. In fact, one half of the most common assignments were basically writing without composing (short answers, worksheets, and lists). (p. 22)

Similarly, Applebee and Langer (2013) found that the amount of writing students are doing overall is especially limited when it comes to extended writing assignments. Of the 8,542 assignments that the researchers gathered from their 138 case-study students, in a sampling of all written work in four core content areas during a semester in twenty schools in five states “only 19 percent of assignments represented extended writing of a paragraph or more: all the rest consisted of fill-in-the-blank and short-answer exercises, and copying of information directly from the teachers’ presentations—activities that are best described as writing without composing” (p.14).

For writing to receive enough attention in a curriculum, assignments need to blossom beyond mere abbreviations to ones that require intellectual work such as analysis and interpretation. And without a doubt, attention to writing demands adequate time.

In today’s schools, writing is a prisoner of time. Learning how to present one’s thoughts on paper requires time. The sheer scope of the skills required for effective writing is daunting. The mechanics of grammar and punctuation, usage, developing a “voice” and a feel for the audience, mastering the distinctions between expository, narrative, and persuasive writing (and the types of evidence required to make each convincing)—the list is lengthy. These skills cannot be picked up from a few minutes here, and a few minutes there, all stolen from more “important” subjects. (National Commission on Writing, 2003, p. 20).

In addition to requiring a hefty amount of time, Kiuahara et al. (2009) suggest, “the teaching of writing is a shared responsibil-

ity. It involves not only language arts teachers but students’ other content teachers across the high school years” (p. 150). But in their national survey of the kinds and frequency of writing across disciplines, the authors found that “almost one third of language arts and social studies teachers did not assign such an activity [writing multiple paragraphs] monthly . . . and a large proportion of science teachers (77%) did not assign such an assignment monthly” (p. 151).

When the curriculum prunes writing down to a nub, students do not get opportunities to practice the kind of writing they are likely to run into in college and/or in their careers. They miss out on key thinking and composing skills, and in terms of writing in a subject area, they miss out on writing to understand the content material.

Writing Curriculum as a Grab Bag

Yet another reason that writing curriculum is so varied is that over time people have viewed writing in a multitude of ways: as a set of skills, as a product, as a process, as expression, as purposeful communication, as reading and writing woven together, and/or as sociocultural practices. For better or for worse, each of these ways of seeing writing lends itself to somewhat different approaches in teaching.

A skills emphasis in a writing curriculum, for example, might concentrate on the rules-based, step-by-step teaching of grammar and sentence structure. Here, writing becomes a collection of discrete skills or behaviors—conveniently layered so that teachers will systematically teach each skill in a particular order, but not necessarily in a context. Where the debate comes in is around this issue of context. Studies show that decontextualized approaches have little if any effect on improving student writing (Hillocks, 1986; Elley, 1994; Elley, Barham, Lamb, & Wyllie, 1975, Myhill & Watson, 2014). Indeed, Steve Graham and Dorothy Perin (2007) found a small but statistically significant negative effect for grammar instruction that was “mostly decontextualized” (Graham, personal communication, August 4, 2016).

The point here is not to discourage the teaching of grammar. Rather, it’s to illustrate how writing curriculum can fluctuate

depending on beliefs about what is most important in teaching students to write. Curriculum shifts around other issues as well, such as how much to emphasize process or product or how much time to spend on self-expression as opposed to writing for specific communicative purposes. Even penmanship—whether or not to teach it and to what extent—is a subject for disagreement. While its benefits are debatable in a modern era, some argue that when children learn handwriting to the degree that it becomes automatic, they can then concentrate more fully on their ideas and the content of writing itself.

The sheer number of curricular approaches and their nuances guarantee that no two students encounter the same approach across time. And while some approaches may rise to the top of the charts, based on research and practice, the effectiveness of any approach ultimately depends on a teacher who uses it *intentionally* and *purposefully*—as opposed to rote—to the advantage of his or her students.

There are certain curricular approaches, nonetheless, that we call “game changers,” that is, approaches whose presence or absence in a writing curriculum can substantially alter student achievement. Although research has identified several promising practices, we focus in the next section on three that stand out for us because they represent significant shifts in traditional curricula:

- ◆ Giving students opportunities to collaborate
- ◆ Taking advantage of technology
- ◆ Deliberately tailoring curriculum for the students at hand

Game Changers in the World of Writing Curriculum

Part of the drama when it comes to writing curriculum is that significant practices and resources—what we are calling game changers—may or may not be available to students. While these game changers are not the only ones in the teaching of writing, they highlight the hit-or-miss nature of curriculum, which privileges some students and leaves others in the dust.

Writing as a Participatory Activity

Students who have engaged in collaborative projects or peer-response groups or any other kind of joint writing endeavor in school have experienced the advantages and challenges of teamwork and cooperation. However, some students still work in isolation, confined not only to their desks, but to the limits of their own talent, knowledge, and imagination.

How important is it that students participate in collaborative activities? Because we live in a participatory society, apprenticeship and interaction have an increasingly important role in learning to write:

Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement. The new literacies almost all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking. These skills build on the foundation of traditional literacy, research skills, technical skills, and critical analysis skills taught in the classroom. (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robinson, 2006, p. 4)

Another way to answer the question about the value of participation is to look at a real-life example. Middle school teacher Liz Harrington creates a participatory culture in her classroom by inviting her students to write blogs about their reading. The students post their blogs at least once every two weeks and are responsible for commenting on the blogs of each member of their classroom book club. The technology makes possible an out-of-school community of readers and writers, stretching the boundaries of the school day. Blogs are due on a Friday night, long after the last bell. And they are more than just blogs. They serve as the teaching tool for using polite, academic language (“[A]lways consider whether you would be happy to read that same comment on your work”) (qtd. in Murphy & Smith, 2015, p. 105).

Consider the intentionality of Harrington’s approach to one of the game changers. Her students learn about three essential skills through this collaboration:

1. How to write to a particular audience and purpose

2. How to interact with peers, including what kind of language to use
3. How to communicate online, including practice with a particular online genre

As an added bonus, Harrington's students are building knowledge that will help them with a future genre—literary analysis. These students also have a leg up in their preparation as writers and collaborators and as citizens using social media responsibly. They also have an advantage when they reach their next destination, whether higher education or the workplace, where collaboration is a way of learning and doing business.

Writing and the Technology Factor

New technologies bring unique challenges for students, including, for example, learning to read and write new hybrid kinds of texts that emphasize visual and interactive features (Hocks, 2003) as well as learning how to use new tools and strategies for researching, drafting, revising, and collaborating (Whithaus, 2005; Leu, Kiili, & Forzani, 2015). As a result, new technology can be a significant source of variation in school curriculum that sets students apart. Not all teachers are prepared to teach with technology, and teachers and students alike are not all at the same starting point. Furthermore, technology is not always available, in quality or quantity, to ensure that all students get sufficient exposure: “[T]here is no doubt that the resources for technology available to schools and colleges—including hardware, software, and teacher development—are often inadequate and frequently unequal” (National Commission on Writing, 2003, p. 23).

The problem of access is not necessarily solved by the ubiquitous smartphone or tablet. While most students have phones and may have learned to Google with ease, they are unlikely to use search engines for academic research without supportive instruction and a reason to do so. But when a school computer lab is available and a knowledgeable teacher provides scaffolding, students can learn to conduct meaningful collaborative research. For example, high school teacher Judy Kennedy describes what

happened when her students dove into the search process for their civic-action projects.

The kids really worked together. They talked about different kinds of search words, tried to interpret what they were looking at, and shared everything they found. They delegated—“you look up this and I’ll look up that.” Kids really liked researching together and finding links. They are naturally curious and don’t necessarily do this kind of thing every day. The computer lab was also a place where they could collaborate on setting up their surveys, writing interview questions, coming up with blogs, and taking notes. (qtd. in Murphy & Smith, p. 110)

Note the number of things a student may or may not learn to do with a computer, depending on the skill of the teacher and access to technology: how to conduct online research, how to find and follow appropriate links, how to collaborate in the process, how to use search words, how to read and analyze what pops up on the screen, how to create surveys (and perhaps other methods of firsthand research as well), how to write for a public audience, and, yes, how to keep track of all the information.

Customizing Curriculum

One of the ironies of the NCLB era was its reliance on standardized curriculum to ensure that no child would miss out on what policymakers deemed indispensable. By imposing the same lessons at the same pace with the same instructions, the NCLB “official curriculum” left behind many children, and particularly those who didn’t fit into the script. The alternative is for teachers to choose the best path for their students: where to start a lesson, how long to linger on a particular skill or activity, where to scaffold, how to engage students, when and how to evaluate, and so on.

We chose two classrooms at different grade levels with predominantly English language learner populations to illustrate how teachers customize for their students, and in the process, how they solve the “drive-by” and “grab bag” problems that occur so often in writing curriculum.

ENGLISH LEARNERS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Most of Zack Lewis-Murphy's students are English learners who need a whole buffet of nourishment, encouragement, and motivation in their 180 days of school, 15 of which are gobbled up by standardized assessments. Thirteen-year veteran Lewis-Murphy dances between a curriculum based on the Common Core State Standards (emphasizing nonfiction reading and argumentative writing) and his own sense of what will give his students a real boost in the long run:

If all students are reading is nonfiction, what happens to love of reading? How can a kid develop a passion for reading, or get into the pattern—you read this book and then the next book. I tried to tackle the love of reading problem with an eighth-grade class with 20 boys in it, all of them bored and near dropouts. Amazon has lots of high-interest, multicultural teen books. I had the students read these for the first 15 minutes of the period. There was some pushback at first, but they began to read and they were interested in what they were reading. It cost me a lot of money to build up the library. (personal communication, December 30, 2015)

The idea of giving students a choice of high-interest material plays out in the class writing curriculum as well. Recently, Lewis-Murphy assigned Lois Lowry's *The Giver* as a class reading and then asked students to create their own dystopian worlds. He pulled out all kinds of scaffolding for this writing, such as models, graphic organizers, vocabulary work, and a myriad of feedback opportunities, including his own lengthy individualized verbal responses using dictation software. Lewis-Murphy also taught students to respond to each other's writing as they exchanged papers with an "elbow partner." The overall result was full-length stories, composed and revised on computers.

Take a look at some first paragraphs—arranged roughly from the lower end to the higher end—and how they reflect the wide-ranging capacities in a single classroom.

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never vote for Trump
by Raiven Brister

The year was 2016 and it was election day and I was at the library voting for the next president. I voted for Bill Carson usually I don't vote but this year I was afraid that if Donald Trump won the election he would deport me back to Mexico. After a few days past for voting the draw came on the tv. Turns out there was only one vote for Bill Carson and I was that one person. Over a million people voted for Trump.

Untitled
by Tia Cooke

In 2019, three years ago the ocean died. All of the vibrant coral reefs and fish were gone. A year after that occurrence the world began to die. There was a huge shortage in food and disease spread. Along with that water became scarce and global warming became bad. I was in the fifth grade when government made everyone start wearing masks outside due to a large amount of greenhouse gasses in the air. People started to die and the government became weak. Then as predicted by my father the renegades took over. The renegades is a organization of people who believe they can save the people from the dying world. But in all reality the world needed saving from the people.

U.S. 2130, Alaskan Territory, Academy of the Country Elite
by Brian Zheng

Luke Reinier woke up in a cold sweat. Last thing he remembered was being at this torn up house where he had been living ever since he was a child. His family was poor, but they invested all they could in his education. Luke graduated at the top of his 12th grade class and that had led him here, to ACE. [Academy of the Country Elite] The top school in the world had invited him, a lowly child that grew up in poverty into their ranks. At first he had been amazed at the invitation to ACE, but once the black vans pulled up in his front door he began to regret accepting the letter. They put a bag over his face just like he had seen in the old crime movies. They took him to an airplane, the first he had ever seen. They flew him all the way from his small hometown in the California territory to the far reaches of the frigid Alaskan Mountains.

It's possible from these excerpts to get a sense of each writer's development when it comes to chronology, detail, sense of audience, vocabulary, and conventions. In terms of fluency, the papers ranged from fourteen single-spaced pages to two double-spaced

pages. Every paper included dialogue and an attempt to establish time, place, and characters.

What's the secret sauce in this classroom? It seems to be a blend of four essential ingredients:

- ◆ Using research-based practices for teaching writing to EL students, such as teacher and student feedback leading to revision
- ◆ Attending to students' varied abilities and interests
- ◆ Finding a place for every student to plug in
- ◆ Shaping curriculum to help these particular students meet standards

Note, too, that writing is hardly a drive-by in this classroom. If there is a mantra that describes Lewis-Murphy's approach, it is this: Engage . . . Scaffold . . . Linger.

ENGLISH LEARNERS IN HIGH SCHOOL

Tracey Freyre currently teaches long-term English learners in a San Francisco Bay Area high school, many of whom were born in the United States or who came to this country at a very young age, but never reached English proficiency. Some of these students read far below grade level, as low as sixth grade. Understandably, a number of them are unmotivated and resistant to reading and writing. So Freyre has her work cut out for her as she teaches them in English support classes designed to help students catch up with their native-English-speaking peers.

In terms of diversity and degree of development in writing, Freyre's students pose significant challenges:

Both newcomers and long-term learners tend to have moved a lot. Their schooling has been inconsistent. Some have experienced severe trauma and separation, particularly the new wave of unaccompanied minors who are living with friends or distant relatives. Some just have a language barrier, but others have major literacy issues and, across the board, these students have motivation issues. (All Freyre quotations are from a personal communication, November 24, 2015.)

There are cultural challenges as well. In contrast to school systems in other countries, where the teacher does all the talking, “teachers here want you talking and interacting and collaborating. Students are not used to this kind of environment, nor do they necessarily know what’s appropriate when communicating in class.” In addition, many students cannot be involved in school life because they are working. In other cases, parents want their children home right after school, which also limits the amount of time they have to speak and practice English, according to Freyre.

With students whose life experiences and levels of development are so different, the trick is how to scaffold to an appropriate level. Freyre explains that she needs “to find the happy medium without over- or under-scaffolding.” She has discovered that thematic units that include texts at appropriate levels, opportunities to integrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and opportunities to practice skills are the most useful for teaching her students. Less useful, according to Freyre, is the kind of curriculum that goes page by page because—no surprise—students get bored.

The kind of teaching Freyre brings to her classroom could be beneficial in any classroom. For example, when Freyre and her students took up narrative writing, they looked first at features of narrative. Together they noted that good writers often focus on a moment. Through a series of minilessons, Freyre taught her students how to choose a significant moment and how to let it unfold, how to build character, and how to incorporate dialogue. “We did multiple drafts and a combination of individual conferences and response groups.” Freyre gave peer responders a set of criteria so they knew what to look for, and she also came up with a rubric tailored to the rhetorical features of narrative. “Here’s where you are,” she told her students, “and here’s where you need to be.”

The piece below came from an English Language Development (ELD) class Freyre taught a few years ago. In this class, Freyre worked with students like Fabiola Prieto, who had been in this country for two to three years.

The Disagreement

How can I make two decisions between [people] that I love? Why I have to chose, I ask to myself raising my head up looking at the sky sitting in the school yard.

Hey lets go. “Let do a complot against the teacher” said Luis Enrique one of my classmates.

Yes! Answered Alejandro

“But I don’t think Fabiola wants to go, she is the spoiled of the teacher,” replied Vanessa.

The student wanted to make a revolution against the teacher like Mexico did in 1910. It was a big deal. But the worst thing was that I was between them.

The teacher was an English teacher and his nick name was “el teacher” he was like a second father to me, he gave me advice, he knew when I was sad and when I had problems in my house. I loved him.

“Fabiola you have to come with us. We are a united group. We know that the teacher is very nice with you but you have to understand us. If we don’t know one word in English he wants us to repeat the word 100 times. It is not fear.” Insisted Luis Enrique with a frightened look.

“I will think about it.” That was all that I said. “The teacher is my best teacher, I know that sometimes he yell at me too but he has reason all the time he just wants us to be good students” I was thinking to myself.

“What should I do? Should I go with my classmates? Or stay in the classroom being like the dark dunk.” I questioned.

The bell rang. We went to the classroom my classmates made a circle they were whispering.

“Fabiola we have a plan when the teacher say something bad to us like that I have sh*t in my head, we all going to outside and tell father Jose.”

We heard steps. The teacher was coming dressing like a lawyer with a tie and a briefcase. He was sitting on the big chair. He screamed “you guys are my worst group except for a few of you. You guys have Teflon heads” He said that very angry.

The students were standing up one bye one. I was the last one. I looked at the teacher and he looked at me, I can remember his sad look while I was standing up slowly. It was one of the wrongs decisions that I have made.

We went with the principal the father Carlos just ignored us. “All of you guys have to say sorry to the teacher.” He demanded that pointing to us.

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I ran back to the classroom. There was el teacher almost crying.

“Teacher, teacher sorry I am sorry.” “I know I know I know.” That was all that he said, hugging me.

When I look back on that day I think of how fortunate I was in having el teacher next to me giving me advice. That day I learn that he wanted me to be good, even if he yell me. I miss him a lot. I hopes one day see him again and say thanks to him.

In Freyre’s notes to Fabiola, she praises the way the writing demonstrates “the conflict you faced between following your classmates or defending your teacher. Your narrative makes the reader feel like he or she is there with you!” We would add that this relatively recent arrival to the United States has learned how to unfold a moment. While her paper reveals typical second language errors, it also shows that Fabiola can incorporate key narrative strategies in her writing: dialogue, detail, conflict, a brief character sketch of “el teacher,” a bit of reflection, a sense of drama, and a structure that works.

Working with developing writers is a juggling act—teaching sophisticated rhetorical features while supporting language development—and certainly calls for more than a grab-bag writing curriculum. Freyre makes teaching decisions based on what she has learned over time about exactly what benefits her students, for example, integrating the language arts. In this classroom example, she maintains a balance so that reading does not eclipse writing, but rather serves as a model for writing.

More about Remodeling Curriculum

If customizing or otherwise remodeling curriculum is a game changer, what else can we learn about it? How do teachers like Harrington, Kennedy, Lewis-Murphy, and Freyre approach writing curriculum and make it work in their classrooms? One answer is that they think first about the students themselves.

After more than thirty years in the English language arts classroom, Harrington puts her students up front. Rather than adopting ideas wholesale, she runs “great ideas” through several filters, all having to do with who is in the classroom at the moment:

When I adapt an idea, I first consider my students, and ask myself what their needs are, and how this idea will address those needs. I think about the diversity of cultural and ethnic backgrounds in my classroom, and wonder about what kind of prior knowledge or frontloading of vocabulary and information my students might need. I consider whether the suggested text is appropriate for my students, or whether I might need to find a different text that is more in their comfort level, or in mine. In many cases, I will merge several ideas gained from several sources to construct a lesson that meets my particular needs at that time. (personal communication, December 29, 2015)

One of the striking features of the way Harrington approaches the teaching of writing is the absence of dogma or “shoulds.” Instead, she tailors her large repertoire of strategies to the immediate situation. Harrington knows a lot about writing, but she also has a firm grip on the elements that will support her students’ learning, for example, introducing vocabulary and essential information.

For Judy Kennedy, who teaches US history, government, and economics, both mainstream and sheltered, ideas for teaching content and academic literacy come from the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG), the Civic Action Project of the Constitutional Rights Foundation, the Bay Area Writing Project, and Facing History. But like other skilled teachers we have interviewed, she does not simply drop ideas into her classroom without customizing them for her students:

I rarely adopt writing ideas wholesale without modification. Most times I have to try the writing assignment myself and see how I would need to scaffold it for my students. I try to think of prewriting activities that will help my students on the actual writing assignment itself. Also, I need to think about what the purpose of the assignment is and how I am going to evaluate it. (personal communication, January 3, 2016)

To understand firsthand what kinds of interventions might be most helpful to her students, Kennedy, now in her fourteenth year of teaching, comes to key decisions about scaffolding and assessment—not in the abstract—but in the process of trying out and possibly modifying her own assignments.

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Skilled teachers also stay on top of changes, whether that means using more current technology or assuring that the content is current. Corine Maday teaches grades 8–12 classes such as Girls Physical Education, Health Science, Nutrition, Drug Alcohol and Tobacco Abuse, HIV/AIDS, and Sexual Health, and she has done so for twenty-six years. Note how she tailors information to make it interesting for her students:

Many times I have to use very up-to-date information because health information is always changing so that means changing information that may be in the curriculum. I also change the way in which it may be presented to better fit my audience. I often have to supplement the curriculum with “real-life” stories or events to help my students make a connection. (personal communication, January 4, 2016)

Maday represents those thoughtful teachers of content who work to make information both timely and interesting, in particular, by reaching beyond the school context for authentic examples that will be meaningful to students.

We finish this brief but firsthand look at how experienced teachers make their way to a writing curriculum shaped for their students with the adamant words of Gail Offen-Brown, recently retired from the UC Berkeley composition program after thirty-eight years. She is unequivocal about redesigning curriculum with her students squarely in sight:

I NEVER adopt ideas wholesale, not even from colleagues in my own program. I think hard about my own students, my goals for the particular assignment within the context of the unit, the class, the semester. I ask myself whether the students have the requisite cultural capital and background knowledge to understand the materials and tasks, and if not how to address that. I consider what kinds of scaffolding are needed. I consider reflective/metacognitive elements. I ask myself how this assignment might stretch my students’ minds and hearts. (personal communication, January 6, 2015)

What these teachers tell us is that education is about more than delivering instruction. It’s about reaching diverse learners and taking them as far as they can go. To do this, teachers must have the

capacity and freedom to “meet them on their own terms, at their own starting points, and with a wide range of strategies to support their success” (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 1992, p. 11).

Building the Capacity of Teachers to Teach Writing *and* Writers

In this chapter we have featured the thinking of experienced teachers and their message is clear. Assignments, lessons, and materials, no matter what their source, are insufficient. Teachers play a critical role as the key architects in designing or remodeling curriculum for their students.

While policymakers have sometimes worked overtime to eliminate teachers from the equation, others like Lee Shulman insist that nothing can replace teachers:

The teacher remains the key. The literature on effective schools is meaningless, debates over educational policy are moot, if the primary agents of instruction are incapable of performing their functions well. No micro-computer will replace them, no television system will clone and distribute them, no scripted lessons will direct and control them, no voucher system will bypass them. (Shulman, 1983, p. 504)

Darling-Hammond agrees that education needs to make a radical departure from past practices that put “test prescriptions, textbook adoptions, and curriculum directives” ahead of investments in increasing the ability of teachers to make key decisions on behalf of their students. The mission of education, according to Darling-Hammond, should be “that teachers understand learners and their learning as deeply as they comprehend their subjects” (1996, p.4).

The recurring debate about where teachers fit into the equation—are they or aren’t they the basic, if not central, learning resource available to students?—becomes even more pressing when the students are disadvantaged and underachieving. In her article, “Good Teaching Matters: How Well-Qualified Teachers Can Close the Gap,” Kati Haycock, president of the Education

Trust, reviews research from Tennessee, Texas, Massachusetts, and Alabama that compares the development of disadvantaged students in situations where teachers are highly skilled and less skilled. In every case, students in the presence of highly skilled teachers are the winners. For Haycock, the research is clear: the factor with the most significant impact on student achievement is the teacher:

After all, poor and minority children depend on their teachers like no others. In the hands of our best teachers, the effects of poverty and institutional racism melt away, allowing these students to soar to the same heights as young Americans from more advantaged homes. (1998, p. 13)

In the next sections, we argue that our most important investment—if we are to *intentionally* and *purposefully* take students into account—is in teachers and in their capacities to teach America’s ever-changing student population.

Investing in Teacher Knowledge

As a start, investing in teacher knowledge means preparing teachers for the complex task of teaching writing and writers. The National Commission on Writing recommends requiring “all prospective teachers to take courses in how to teach writing” (2006, p. 43). But this initial investment is not enough. Teachers should have ongoing opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills.

Darling-Hammond and Snyder (1992) describe the kinds of investments that support teachers and their continued growth and development, including “opportunities for teachers to jointly plan and evaluate their work; to reflect together about the needs and progress of individual students and groups of students; and to share teaching ideas, strategies, and dilemmas for collective problem solving” (p. 23). Commonsense investments like these, however, mean a cosmic change from past top-down policies and financial priorities. They call for devoting considerable time and resources to increasing teacher expertise as opposed to deskilling teachers with scripted materials. They call for making space for

teachers to interact instead of keeping them in the silos of their classrooms.

The kind of investment recommended by Darling-Hammond and Snyder offers an excellent return. When teachers participate in long-term professional development networks, for example the National Writing Project, not only do they learn specific techniques, they also grapple with and refine “big ideas” in writing instruction, ideas such as focusing on purposes for writing, scaffolding students’ writing processes, and linking their teaching to their own experiences as writers (Whitney & Friedrich, 2013). They challenge, inquire into, and revise such ideas in ongoing interactions with other teachers. And they use these “big ideas” to develop and revise curriculum.

The best teachers we know are always building their banks of research-based strategies for teaching writing because any single approach can hardly do the job in today’s classrooms. Moreover, successful teachers understand that the bank is never full. New strategies are always in the making. Furthermore, because teachers are on the front line, they know what challenges and issues need attention.

What kinds of things do teachers themselves find valuable in professional development? One answer comes from a seven-year Inverness Research survey study of 22,000 participating teachers in National Writing Project summer institutes. Teachers reported that they benefit from professional development that “increases their ability to teach students of diverse backgrounds” and from information on how to “help students meet standards.” They also cited as helpful information about “up to date research and practice,” “ways to assess student work and plan teaching,” and “concrete teaching strategies” (Stokes & St. John, 2008, p. v).

The survey also indicates that teachers are interested in learning about practices that have immediate relevance and use in the classroom. It makes sense, then, to let teachers identify their most pressing issues. In that regard, the National Commission on Writing (2006) recommends “districts *transform professional development* by turning the responsibility and funding for it over to teachers.” The Commission also recommends “embedding professional development in the job.” It finds alternatives like one-shot sessions, also known as “drive-by” training, ineffective

because they provide “little tangible or long-term benefits to teachers.” Instead, the Commission recommends “making professional development part of the daily working lives of teachers—by providing time for it during the school schedule on a regular and recurring basis” (p. 26).

Investing in Opportunities for Teachers to Share Their Knowledge and Expertise

For an outsider looking into the daily life of schools, it’s hard to imagine that teachers wouldn’t find *some* time to talk together about what’s happening in their classrooms or to share some of the work of their students, or better yet, to consult each other when they run into some kind of road block. But in fact, teachers have little time or inclination to sit down together—not when there are lessons to plan, papers to grade, and, in this era of social media, curriculum, assignments, and messages to post for students and their parents. The situation is deceiving:

The “structural isolation within which the teacher has to operate,” each working within his or her own classroom, has created a vision of the self-made teacher, a vision in which “teaching comes to be seen as an individual accomplishment,” rather than a collaborative venture, and “a natural expression of a teacher’s personality” rather than an enactment of disciplinary knowledge and professional expertise. (Labaree, 2004, pp. 51–52)

So finding a place, a time, and a relevant agenda for teachers to share their knowledge and expertise requires special attention and structured support. One not-so-new invention that brings teachers together are teacher networks. Ann Lieberman and Milbrey McLaughlin (1992) note:

[N]etworks, committed as they are to addressing the tough and enduring problems of teaching, deliberately create a discourse community that encourages exchange among the members. Being a part of the discourse community assures teachers that their knowledge of their students and of schooling is respected. Once they know this, they become committed to change, willing to take risks, and dedicated to self-improvement. (p. 674)

Certainly, James Gray was thinking about the value of teachers sharing their knowledge when he founded the Bay Area Writing Project. Gray was keenly aware that there were teachers in the community who knew a lot about the teaching of writing, although they had few opportunities to share their expertise:

I knew that the knowledge successful teachers had gained through their experience and practice in the classroom was not tapped, sought after, shared, or for the most part, even known about. I knew also that if there was ever going to be reform in American education, it was going to take place in the nation's classrooms. And because teachers—and no one else—were in those classrooms, I knew that for reform to succeed, teachers had to be at the center. (2000, p. 50)

Gray's plan was to invite outstanding teachers from the schools and the university and put them to work together in a summer institute, after which they would teach their colleagues how to teach writing during the school year. The mantra was "teachers teaching teachers." In the years that followed, the writing project became a national model for effective professional development, one that provides significant opportunities for teacher learning and collaboration.

Commenting on the value of teacher networks, Darling-Hammond observes:

[P]rofessional communities of teachers can have a large and positive impact, doing much more than simply sharing teacher tips. Teachers who are able to collaborate with other teachers are really engaged in work where they are rolling up their sleeves to design and evaluate curriculum and instruction together in a way that allows them to share their expertise deeply and in a sustained and ongoing fashion. (Darling-Hammond, qtd. in Collier, 2011, p. 12)

Another example of "rolling up their sleeves" occurs when teachers pull out their students' writing and invite their colleagues to take a look. Analyzing student work together opens up all kinds of conversations, from the strengths and limitations of the writing to possibilities for next steps. These discussions zero in on what

happens when students are learning to write with all the messiness, frustrations, and complexities that involves.

The advantages of inviting teachers to the table and of giving them multiple forums for sharing what they know are numerous:

- ◆ Teachers generate and gain more knowledge each time they interact with their colleagues.
- ◆ Teachers gain deeper insights into the range of student abilities and how to address that range when they assess student work together.
- ◆ Teachers who work together do things that are impossible to do alone, like developing a common language for teaching writing.
- ◆ Veteran teachers up the game of novice teachers.
- ◆ Teachers bring needed support directly to the classroom when they mentor one another in positions like literacy coaching.
- ◆ Teachers become more motivated and energetic when they can turn to one another to solve problems.
- ◆ Teachers are more likely to examine new resources or take risks with tools like technology in collaboration with their peers.

Given half a chance, teachers naturally gravitate toward sharing with each other. During his tenure as English department chair in a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, high school, Jerry Halpern actively looked for ways to get teachers together, including weekly meetings for talking shop. As an outgrowth of these meetings, Halpern and two colleagues began observing one another and then decided to teach one another’s classes:

Each worked up a set of minilessons or minicourses and began trading classrooms. Afterward they shared what happened—the good and the not-so-good. “The professional dialogue kept us focused. We were talking about curriculum and student writing and how to use our individual strengths to help these kids,” remembers Halpern. (Murphy & Smith, 2015, p. 128)

In the end, teacher sharing is a kind of professionalism that has particular characteristics, according to Halpern: “a fundamental focus on teaching and learning; a high degree of collegiality and

collaboration; a willingness to put yourself and your work forward for examination” (Murphy & Smith, 2015, p. 127).

As impressive as the Halpern example is, it’s unrealistic to expect individual teachers to initiate all the conversations that need to happen. Here again, networks give teachers the kind of boost they need to adopt new teaching approaches for the benefit of their students:

When they construct ideas about practice with their colleagues, teachers act as both experts and apprentices, teachers and learners. Members of networks report an intellectual and emotional stimulation that gives them the courage to engage students differently in the classroom—an opportunity especially valued by teachers working in urban schools. (Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992, p. 674)

Investing in Teachers as Writers, Scholars, and Leaders

In 1984, Marian Mohr, a teacher in Northern Virginia, published a book called *Revision: The Rhythm of Meaning*. It quickly became a classic among writing teachers, not just because of its 248 pages of ideas about teaching students to revise, but because it was a window into a real classroom. Mohr’s publisher, Bob Boynton, a former English teacher at Germantown Friends School in Philadelphia, devoted himself to publishing what teachers had to say on all kinds of subjects, including the still popular teachings of Boothbay Harbor’s Nancie Atwell (1987) in her book *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents*. Boynton also put his teacher-writers on planes to fly wherever there were conferences or institutes, and no surprise, there was a huge audience of teachers waiting at the other end to hear what another colleague—someone who walked the walk—could tell them about teaching and learning.

Not everyone who writes in the field of composition writes about classroom practice. In fact, it’s likely that teachers are the primary authors of what goes on in classrooms, while college faculty contribute a greater percentage of research reports, and fewer descriptions of practice. In her analysis of contributions to three NCTE publications—*Language Arts, Voices from the*

Middle, and *English Journal*—Anne Whitney (2009) notes that K–12 teachers write mostly about teaching practices. Thus, if we want to read about on-the-ground practices and issues, we look to teachers to carry the bulk of the conversation.

And who knows the audience of teachers better than teachers? According to Whitney et al. (2012), from their interviews with thirteen teacher-authors, the teacher-authors “wanted to produce something that classroom teachers could use. They wanted to share their own experiences of what worked and sometimes of what did not.” As one of the teacher-authors put it, “How can I make this make sense, and appealing also, to another English teacher?” (p. 404).

Recent examples of teacher scholarship can be found in the work of teachers Jim Burke, Kelly Gallagher, and Carol Jago, who have collectively authored thirty books, along with contributing to textbooks and other collections. They make podcasts and DVDs for their colleagues, conduct workshops, and frequently show up as conference keynote speakers. Jago has edited the professional journal *California English* for the past twenty years. This scholarship translates easily into leadership. When any of these three is in front of a group of teachers, the audience reacts with laughter, applause, nodding heads, pertinent questions, and copious note taking.

It makes sense that teachers gravitate to reading about and listening to their colleagues’ experiences. But beyond what’s published, investing in opportunities for teachers to write about their practice has big rewards for students. As Whitney and Friedrich (2013) explain, teachers use “their ongoing experiences as writers to gain insight into the supports their students would need as they worked” (p. 11):

Seeing oneself as a writer and linking that to students’ experiences as writers offers at least two main benefits cited by NWP teachers: first, it provides empathy for student experience and firsthand knowledge of the challenges student writers might face when writing; second, it positions the teacher relative to students as a writer among writers. (p. 24)

There is a theme here: investing in teacher scholarship, leadership, and writing pays off. What’s more, the payoff increases when the

investment is in *putting teachers to work* teaching their colleagues. Effective professional development, like classroom teaching, is more than a delivery system. When teachers are in charge of workshops, seminars, study groups, institutes, conferences and the like, the content more closely relates to the realities of the classroom. For example, Stokes (2010) explains how writing project teachers prepare to lead professional development sessions:

Individual teacher-consultants focus on teaching problems that they find most vexing in their own practice and important to their students. In so doing, they amass resources and develop classroom practices that will be germane to their colleagues who face similar challenges. (p. 149)

Perhaps the most compelling reason to invest in opportunities for teacher leadership is the potential for expert, veteran teachers to stay in the profession—a phenomenon that greatly improves student learning. In its study of 5,534 individuals who participated in summer institutes from 1974 to 2006 and who completed a professional history survey, NWP researchers found that 99 percent of institute participants stayed in classrooms and in the profession for over seventeen years. Of these teachers, 72 percent remained in the classroom while 27 percent played other roles in education, for example in administrative positions. Fewer than one percent worked outside of education (Friedrich et al., 2008, pp. 10–11).

Investing in Teacher Research

One mutual activity that attracts many teachers, to the benefit of their students, is classroom research. As long ago as 1978, Northern Virginia Writing Project teacher Marian Mohr began her foray into conducting research by retitling her teaching journal “Research Log” (Gray, 2000, p. 91). Later coauthor Marion MacLean and Mohr (1999) shared their discoveries about what happens when teachers become researchers:

Teacher-researchers raise questions about what they think and observe about their teaching and their students’ learning. They collect student work in order to evaluate performance, but they

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also see student work as data to analyze in order to examine the teaching and learning that produced it. (p. x)

One of the notable advantages of this kind of research is that teachers conduct it in the context of the classroom (Mohr & MacLean, 1987). In terms of classroom practice, teacher research provides “interpretive frames that teachers use to understand and to improve their own classroom practices” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, p. 7).

Another advantage when it comes to curriculum design is that when teachers closely analyze various aspects of their teaching, including the results, they are more likely to make ongoing adjustments. In other words, the curriculum, rather than being static, becomes dynamic and responsive to real classroom events.

Many teacher-researchers collaborate with their students to answer mutually interesting questions—a strategy that transforms roles in the classroom because the research process and findings belong to both. And because the research involves teaching and learning, teachers also have something useful to pass along to their colleagues:

As their research becomes integrated into their teaching, their definition of teacher-researcher becomes *teacher*—a teacher who observes, questions, assists, analyzes, writes, and repeats these actions in a recursive process that includes sharing their results with their students and with other teachers. (Mohr & MacLean, 1987, p. 4)

No doubt teacher research, among other professional activities, has contributed to improving what happens in classrooms and schools. And that’s the goal of any investment in education—to get it right for every student in every classroom and school. Placing bets on teachers is not a gamble, especially in the area of classroom curriculum and its relevance to the students at hand:

Once the important concepts and generalizations are identified at a national level for a particular field of study, the way in which they are transformed into an operational curriculum for students is a task for the teacher or the faculty of the school. In this way both national and local needs can be met. (Eisner, 1985, p. 139)

To make relevant improvements in teaching and learning, tailored to the current needs of diverse students, it takes those on the ground who have the essential knowledge and experience.

Investing in Teachers to Help Solve Educational Problems: The Power of Positive Deviance

How do people in professions other than education solve some of their most difficult problems? One key strategy is to look to those on the inside for solutions. Atul Gawande describes a long-standing problem with hospital infections in the United States due to lack of proper handwashing. At a veterans' hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, those in charge had made every possible move to encourage handwashing, including cajoling, reprimanding, and pointing to gel dispensers. However, the infections continued. In some cases, medical staff actually rebelled against outsiders' telling them what to do.

Even with the most innovative solutions, the hospital failed to create lasting change. Still, there was a desperate need to turn things around. One of the hospital surgeons came across the idea of *positive deviance*—a notion about working from the inside, building on the capacities people already have as an alternative to bringing in outside “experts” to tell them what and how they need to change. In March 2005, food-service workers, janitors, nurses, doctors, and even patients participated in a series of small-group discussions. To introduce the first session, the leaders, headed by the surgeon, said, “We’re here because of the hospital infection problem and we want to know what *you* know about how to solve it.” What happened next was nothing short of a landslide:

Ideas came pouring out. People told of places where hand-gel dispensers were missing, ways to keep gowns and gloves from running out of supply, nurses who always seem able to wash their hands, and even taught patients to wash their hands too. Many people said it was the first time anyone had ever asked them what to do. The norms began to shift. When forty new hand-gel dispensers arrived, staff members took charge of putting them in the right places. Nurses who would never speak up when a doctor failed to wash his or her hands began to do so after learning of other nurses who did. (Gawande, 2007, p. 26)

The *inside* team managed all the follow-up by posting monthly results and promoting their ideas on the hospital website and in newsletters. Gawande explains the result: “One year into the experiment—and after years without widespread progress—the entire hospital saw its MRSA [infection by antibiotic-resistant bacteria] wound infection rates drop to zero” (pp. 26–27).

Jerry Sternin and his wife Monique developed the idea of positive deviance—finding solutions from insiders. In his YouTube video, Sternin (2015) offers this metaphor for positive deviance: “The faraway stick cannot kill the nearby snake.” In the world of education, the faraway curriculum cannot serve all the nearby students with their various cultures, languages, and abilities.

Positive deviance is a loaded term, without a doubt, and its application to date has often privileged uncommon solutions, although with some excellent outcomes. However, it’s the mental shift that interests us. In a profession like education, with a history of pendulum swings and winner-take-all arguments about how to teach one thing or another, for example the reading wars of the recent past, there is a crying need for openness to what insiders have to say. Further, given the complexities of teaching a wide range of learners, it seems that insider knowledge should be a precious, sought-after commodity.

Taking teachers into account is not a new concept, but the concept sorely needs staying power and policies that support rather than weaken it. Certainly, control from the top has had less than stellar results, and as our population becomes more heterogeneous, top-down approaches are bound to be less and less successful.

Teachers are much more than a conduit for a prepackaged curriculum. Without thoughtful adaptation, this kind of curriculum is dead on arrival, at least if we expect it to support the learning of each student in the local classroom. Since teachers are the ones to work directly with students, they are the ones to customize “official” curricula for their students or to create their own curricula as the case may be.

But the development and use of teacher knowledge, leadership, and expertise has to happen on a larger scale than is possible in preservice education or in worthy, but relatively small, professional development programs. It must be built into the way

schools, districts, and universities operate. It must be systemic, not here and there on the sidelines. And for good reason. What local teachers know is critical to giving all students a fighting chance at a real education.

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