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TEACHER-AS-WRITER AND WRITER-AS-TEACHER: AN INQUIRY INTO A

COMMUNITY OF TEACHER-WRITERS

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**ABSTRACT**

For several decades, teachers have often been encouraged to write for publication, and many educators have taken up this opportunity, whether independently or as a part of writing communities. Professional development designs have created unique and supportive communities for teachers to engage in writing for both professional journals and more widely read publications. This case study examines the role of a local writing group for three teacher-writers in their work toward publishing articles. The analysis examines how the teacher-writers learn about writing through the writing community and highlights the teacher-writers' successes and frustrations of writing for publication. This study also examines the potential links between teachers who engage in writing and how the knowledge created in that experience may influence writing instruction in the teacher-writers' elementary classrooms, and encourages further research in this area. Finally, this thesis explores how writing in community as a piece of professional learning may strengthen the teacher voice and raise up the professionalism of teaching.

# Table of Contents

**Chapter I: An Introduction**

When I first started teaching, I felt pretty lost. I was hired to teach writing, a subject that required me to go more by my gut than by my training. The textbook didn't satisfy my need, most of the teachers in my department used the textbook and its companion workbooks, and it was difficult to coax adequate responses from them about my teaching questions. By January, I was really frustrated with spelling tests, daily grammar practices, and very few interesting essays written by my students. I couldn't see that my students were really learning anything, and I needed some help.

It was January of that year that I first attended a teaching conference held by the Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts (TCTELA). It just happens that the conference was held in a nearby city, so my district was willing to pay for the low costs and I saw this as one way to get some much-needed help for my teaching. None of the other teachers at my school went with me, so I spent the weekend navigating the conference completely on my own. It was at this conference that I discovered other teachers doing more than just teaching: they were doing advocacy work, research, writing articles for journals, and presenting at conferences. These people knew how to teach! They were sharing their work. They had voice. And confidence. I knew I was surrounded by professionals I wanted to be like, and this experience put me on a road to learning more about how teachers, as professionals, inquire about the acts of teaching and learning.

Since that first lonely school year, I have attended state and national conferences and even presented at a couple myself. I've met teachers who write instructional books, novels, and poetry. I attended a summer institute with the North Star of Texas Writing

Project, a National Writing Project site. I discovered a community of colleagues in the National Writing Project that invited teachers to inquire about their practice as well as offered support to teachers as they constructed their experiences into pieces for publication. Over the last thirty years, the National Writing Project has been routinely looked to for its leadership in professional development and community building for teachers of writing (see Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008; Lieberman & Wood, 2001; Blau, 1988). In an open letter to President Obama, Lieberman and Mace point to the National Writing Project as a model for developing powerful professional communities, "The NWP has shown us not only how to engage teachers professionally but also how to involve them in a community that cares about them, their learning, and their continuous growth," (2008, p.229). To date, the National Writing Project has over 200 sites across the United States and its territories and is one of the most well-known and successful professional development projects in the nation. Teachers are invited to annual summer institutes where they engage in their own personal and professional writing, teaching demonstrations, inquiry projects, and study groups in order to bring together a larger network of teacher-based knowledge to the practices of teaching.

Early in my teaching career, I often longed for more professional interaction about serious questions in my teaching. Over the summer of 2008, I finally found a space in the NWP where I could write about the questions I had, digest them, and then turn to like-minded teachers for critique, advice, and resources. I recognized that the writing I did in the summer institute and the opportunities available to share writing with colleagues made an impact on me as a teacher, and I sought out opportunities to continue working closely with colleagues from the NWP in a study group. This experience served

as one of the more influential springboards to pursue a Masters degree and to learn more about teacher inquiry and its relationship to classroom practice. After just three years of teaching, I left the classroom to go back to school and learn to research as a part of my teaching practice. And now, I have spent a semester talking to teachers about what it means to write about teaching and to publish—to become the teacher-writer. Learning to open up the teaching practice, to write then to publish, is a difficult road to attempt alone. I'm more convinced than ever that teachers need communities to achieve publishing goals.

As I hope to return to the classroom again next fall, I want to take with me the skills to join or establish a professional community of teachers—a community of practice—centered around writing about the practices of teaching. The work of teachers writing for other teachers, for other educators, and for the larger communities in which they are situated is coming into increasing importance. While public policy focuses mainly on content-based professional development that demonstrates direct connections to student achievement, I wonder how might a writing group that focuses on experiences of the teachers' lives and practice impact what teachers know about their practice? Where might school and district-based writing groups find a place in the larger picture of professional learning for local educators? It is with these questions of the nature of writing and learning that I move forward to inquire about one specific writing group for teachers.

The aim of this thesis is to provide a snapshot into one semester of a teacher writer group based in a small college town located in the northeast, and to consider how teachers talk about the teaching and learning that takes place as a result of the writing

group. This work is informing how I will move forward in my profession, hopefully writing and publishing on the basis of my own teaching practice, but also to work collectively with other educators to write about teaching and learning in public education today. In addition, I hope this research helps to inform the group's facilitators about potential next moves for their own work and research with the group as they continue to support the writing of teachers across the school district.

This work is divided into the following four chapters: The second chapter provides a review of the literature around writing and professional learning in the teaching profession. The third chapter is a summation of the methods undertaken to produce this study. The fourth and fifth chapters provide the results of this research, which are divided into an examination of the teacher-as-writer and the writer-as-teacher. Finally, the sixth chapter provides a discussion of the research results.

**Chapter II: Literature Review**

A review of the literature on teacher-writers, learning communities, and professional development has brought forth three notions that will underpin my thinking as I move forward with this study. First, writing constructs knowledge that brings us to a fuller awareness of our values, beliefs, and practices, which are negotiated by our participation in a community. Secondly, powerful professional learning is intensive, on going, collaborative, and connected to practice. Finally, writing has a relationship to improving teachers' practices. This review will take up each statement in detail to clarify my understanding of the literature on the aforementioned themes in my reading.

**Writing for Understanding**

Writing is a difficult task for most people, but it has the potential to be one of the most useful tasks in building a knowledge base to act upon. "In order to make one's meaning clear for others, one must first make it clear for oneself. Writing is thus potentially a powerful means of developing one's own understanding of the topic about which one is writing," (Haneda & Wells, 2000, p. 433). Writing allows the individual to put forth ideas into a space where they can be physically manipulated to re-construct knowledge into a representation of thought that communicates to the self and others about the topic of which one is writing.

According to Flower and Hayes'(1981) cognitive process model of writing, the writing process is a hierarchical structure of three major processes: planning, translating, and reviewing, within which several sub-processes are situated. Unlike a linear model of writing, where the product takes focus, the cognitive process model allows the writer to

engage his thinking and re-construct the text at any point in its production. This concept of a flexible, constant re-working of a text is important to consider when examining writing situated in both an individual and social context: revising a text is influenced both by the individual's planning and thinking and the conversation which occurs around the text within the social setting of the writing group.

When examining revision in a social setting like a writing group, it's important to examine the writing across its process in order to understand the influences on the construction of knowledge within the text. In his most influential text, *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky writes, "The evolution from the draft to the final copy reflects our mental process,"(1986, p. 242). The long process of writing generates a product that is a representation of both individual and social influences on the text. Of interest in this study is how the intersection of the individual's writing with a community of writers could influence drafts submitted for publication.

Writing has the potential to help teachers negotiate between their ideal practices and the reality of their practice. The act of writing for professional literature might help teachers negotiate between educational theory and the reality of public school settings. Having a community to turn to for collaboration and feedback may strengthen the writing itself, reinforce the teacher-writer's beliefs or values in the writing, or challenge the writer's text in a way that creates enormous change in the product. According to Haneda and Wells:

> Writing creates a permanent representation of meaning, whatever the field
> or discipline concerned. As such, the text can become the focus of
> discussion within the community in an effort to understand it, improve it,

or respond to it in some way that gives voice to the community's interests and concerns, (2000, p. 433).

Teachers are often not encouraged to write about their practices, and many are exposed to few opportunities to reflect and make sense of the realities of teaching in public schools. For those who have an opportunity to write, not just alone, but within a community, their opportunities for growth are likely multiplied through the conversations that can occur around the recording of their experiences. The writing community in which the teacher-writer is located often has a stake-hold in the writing of that educator, and will likely, therefore, help to shape the writing in such a way that it not only represents an individual's understanding of teaching, but the understanding of the group. Even if a manuscript is not published, the group's dialogue around the writing is full of potential for stimulating professional growth. Reinforcing this idea, Harris writes:

> We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of the communities to which we belong (1989, p. 12).

The expectation is such that each piece of writing should reflect both the writer as an individual and also the community in which the writer participates.

Another important role the writing group may play for teachers participating within the group is as a first audience, a critical role for building support in the exigency of writing, defining conventions of genre, and making a move toward publishing

(Whitney, et al., 2010). Within a supportive group of practicing teacher-writers, it may be possible for teachers to position themselves and their writing within a friendlier context prior to entering the larger professional discourse in publication, providing a space that allows teachers to move from practitioners to contributors within the larger context of the field of educational writing. It is within this communal space that potential lies for developing a sense of authority on matters of both teaching and writing (Whitney, et al., in publication; Whitney, 2009b).

**Writing as Professional Learning**

According to the National Staff Development Council's 2009 report on the status of professional learning in the United States, "Effective professional development is intensive, ongoing, and connected to practice; focuses on the teaching and learning of specific academic content; is connected to other school initiatives; and builds strong working relationships among teachers," (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009, p. 5). Collaborative writing groups, similar to those seen in the National Writing Project summer institutes, might offer one local solution to connecting teachers to one another and to engage deeply in matters of practice that are immediate to the locality. In fact, it is collaboration among teachers that is central to the effective design of the National Writing Project's professional development model. Effective collaboration allows educators to work collectively to build a knowledge base to act upon:

> Collaboration—a process considered central to successful professional
> development programs—ensures that what is discovered will be communicable
> because it is discovered in the context of group discussion. Collaboration, then,

becomes essential for the development of professional knowledge, not because

collaborations provide teachers with social support groups but because

collaborations force their participants to make their knowledge public and

understood by colleagues…. But professional knowledge must also be public in a

more expanded sense: It must be created with the *intent* of public examination,

with the goal of making it shareable among teachers, open for discussion,

verification, and refutation or modification, (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002).

The National Writing Project offers a basis for replicating collaborative strategies

across other professional learning groups, and can be a model for further localizing

professional writing as professional learning. In writing about how the National Writing

Project helped some teachers move forward in their writing for publication, Whitney

writes that teachers were most aided by the space provided by the NWP to collaborate on

writing:

It is not the case that teachers worried about article conventions, NWP

offered assistance with article conventions and then the teacher moved

forward. Instead, the set of resources available within the NWP network

were cultural ones—groups of collaborators, audiences to write for and

respond to, and models (both in people and in texts) to emulate and adapt

from. Thus it was not as a set of discrete and concrete tools but as a space

for interaction that NWP supported teachers in writing for publication

(Whitney, 2010, p. 245).

From this research, it can be inferred that one of the most important aspects of the NWP's

success in professional development is the space which it provides teachers to support

one another in the act of writing, as learners, together. However, NWP sites are regional communities, focused on the development of teachers across many cities and school districts. The literature suggests that powerful professional learning occurs at the school or district level, and developing similar cultural spaces for teachers in a more local environment could potentially be advantageous for the professional development of individual and collective groups of teachers.

According to Lois Brown Easton, editor of the National Staff Development Council's *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (2008), powerful professional learning requires that the learning is ultimately in the hands of the educator but can be supported through deep, intensive engagement in on-going activities that are directly connected to the educator's practice. Teachers involved in a local community group focused on writing about professional issues easily achieve all of these criteria that support teacher learning; however, this kind of focus on writing about teaching is not explicitly addressed by the National Staff Development Council. The collaborative support for writing professional texts, as used in the NWP's model for teacher learning, has the potential for mediating theory and practice effectively for teachers, especially when on-going and site-based.

**Writing to Improve Practice**

Despite a robust literature among college composition educators, very little has been written about the PK-12 public school teacher. Where those in higher education often fall under the pressure of "publish or perish," no such expectation is held for teachers in public education, and PK-12 teachers publish in practitioner journals

infrequently (Whitney, et al., 2010). Although teachers may write with or for their students, they rarely write about their teaching for other professionals or a more public audience. And though debates about whether or not teachers should write have been long-standing, they are most frequently focused on the secondary English teacher, rather than teachers across the spectrum of public education (Wess & Figuhr, 1982; Robbins, 1992).

Over the past four decades, there has been extensive discourse around teachers doing the work of writers in order to establish themselves as competent teachers of writing. In a 1982 publication in the *English Journal*, Robert C. Wess finishes his argument for writing teachers to publish their writing with the compelling statement, "But what better way is there to assuage public clamor for teacher competency than by demonstrating our mastery of the discipline and our capability of using these skills as effective teaching models," (Wess & Figuhr, p. 20). However, the act of writing also has potential for teachers not necessarily engaged in the teaching of composition: teachers from across the disciplines who write for professional publication may have an opportunity to improve their practices through writing.

Lieberman and Wood draw the parallels of writing and teaching together in this way: "To learn to write better, one must write, go public, be critiqued, and revise. To learn to teach better, one must teach, go public, be critiqued, and revise," (2001, p. 182). In a writing group, there is a potential for bringing to the surface our reservoir of knowledge: for combining, creating, and enacting new knowledge generated through the processes of writing a text. Both writing and teaching can be problematic and difficult to understand, but through revision—especially public and social revision—there is a possibility for improving both practices. Within the socially mediated practices of

11

teaching and writing is a potential for generating knowledge that connects the individual deeply to the community (Erdman, 1984). The community has potential to renew itself, as each opportunity to critically deconstruct and reconstruct learning reflects back to the teacher-writers their practice and their understanding of practice in both individual and communal contexts.

Supporting teacher-writers in a local community may take educators one step further in establishing themselves professionally in the larger dialogue about teaching. "Once they've gone public and put themselves on the line with their peers, however, the responses they receive build mutual trust, and the safety they feel in that context vastly extends subsequent risk-taking,"(Lieberman & Wood, When teachers write: Of networks and learning, 2001, p. 179). In addition, there are implications in this statement about teacher practices: the possibilities of trying new methods of teaching or of stepping into new leadership roles are potential next moves for teachers (see Watson, 1981; Whitney, 2009).

According to the National Staff Development Council's report on professional learning, 57% of American teachers "received fewer than two days of professional development in the content of the subject(s) they taught during the previous twelve months, "(Darling-Hammond et al, 2009, pp. 20). For educators involved in writing about their own instructional practices, engaging in the process collaboratively with other educators provides an additional opportunity to receive training in their content area because authentically writing and collaboratively revising shapes what we know and how we construct learning experiences for our students.

Having the craft of teaching as the center of a communal writing practice may re-shape teaching as a profession. It is worth quoting at length Lieberman and Miller:

> As teachers make commitments to their professional learning communities, they simultaneously develop new ways of talking and thinking. They learn to move from congenial to collegial conversation and to take part in honest talk. They develop the ability and dispositions to do knowledge work and engage with theory and research as well as practice. They become skilled at making connections among their profession, their teaching practices, and the learning of their students. They gain the confidence to go public with their work, and they enlarge their ideas about what it means to be a teacher. In doing so, they also redefine the role of teacher, (Lieberman & Miller, 2008, p. 18).

By meeting consistently, writing groups can, as a piece of professional practice, provide a regular and consistent opportunity for teachers to reflect upon their work in the classroom, connect with others, bridge the gaps between the reality of public school classrooms and scholarly research, and assert themselves as professionals in a public forum. The space provided by writing groups, like those seen regionally with the NWP or locally, as in the case of the group examined in this thesis, is invaluable as a professional development service for teachers seeking to find their voice in the profession.

In summation, writing can be an informative and formative piece of teachers' professional learning. Providing support systems through communal writing groups has the potential to re-shape the profession as teachers become not only consumers of knowledge about teaching and learning, but also creators of knowledge about teaching and learning. Understanding how to develop, support, and sustain opportunities for

professional writing for teachers is a critical undertaking, and this research aims to add to

the available literature on writing as a practice of professional learning.

**Chapter III. The Study**

**Purpose**

This study has potential as a significant contribution to the understanding of teacher-writer groups and the professional learning potential that writing groups may have, independent of other similar professional learning strategies like inquiry or study groups. This study aims to examine the practices of the teachers within the writing community and to gain an understanding of why they choose to come to the writing group, the kinds of writing they bring, and how the community shapes itself and the writing of its members through the first semester of the school year. In addition to aiding teachers in the process of publication, a localized community of practice (see Wenger, 1998) around the act of writing, a space for educators to make explicit through writing the experiences of teaching, may have the potential to break down the boundaries within a school or district that keep teachers separated from one another intellectually and professionally.

The practice of writing is beneficial for the individual's learning, as it helps the teacher-writer to reflect, unload, play with ideas, and examine practice(Whitney, 2009a). Bringing writing to confer upon with a group of like-minded professionals enables the teacher to experience writing as a social act: one in which we communicate our knowledge, revise ideas, and share other ways of being teachers, writers, and humans. Also, philosopher Maxine Greene describes a person's consciousness as "the way in which he or she thrusts into the world," (1995, pp. 25-26). The experience of writing might be thought of as the vehicle of our consciences, thrusting into the world and wakening ourselves, or in the case of professional development, to the goals of our

practices. We cannot underestimate the power of writing to bring the full self into the practice of teaching.

**Context**

I began participating in the Community Teacher-Writers group at the beginning of the fall 2010 semester. The group has been together since 2008, but it was in early 2010 that the group formally adopted the title of Community Teacher-Writers and began publishing a monthly column in a local newspaper in addition to writing articles intended for professional journals. The writing group is made up of teachers across multiple grade levels and disciplines, primarily employed in the school district of College City, although many of the secondary teachers are English teachers. The group meets once a month during the school year, and although approximately twenty local educators are included in the group's e-mail invitations each month, typically three to five teachers attend each meeting. During the semester I participated in the group, only one member attended every meeting, although several were regular attendees. Two professors from a local university facilitate the group and serve as organizers, mentors, editors, and, sometimes, publishers of the group's work.

The monthly meetings last about one hour and fifteen minutes and are usually held in a community room in the local public library, not far from several elementary schools and the district's one high school. The final meeting of the semester was held at the home of one of the facilitators. Although there is no formal structure or organization of time for the group, typically the teacher-writers spend the first five to ten minutes getting organized and chatting with one another as people arrive. Then, usually prompted

by one of the facilitators, but sometimes a group member, the group talks about house-keeping issues for the next five to ten minutes, followed up by some time to write, which ranges from ten to twenty-five minutes. Sometimes, this writing time is completed after a specific amount of time has been agreed upon, but it is often wrapped up by the group's consensus that they are ready to talk about the writing. The remainder of the meeting is used as sharing time for each writer, and each person has some time to talk about what they are working on and what they need from the group.

Each month, many teachers bring writing they are currently working on, including articles for the monthly editorial column as well as articles intended for submission to professional journals. There is very little writing brought to the group outside of these intended purposes. Sometimes, group members use the free time provided at the beginning of the meeting to write; then use the sharing time to talk about ideas they have for potential pieces. Often, the teachers use the sharing time to introduce pieces and then send selections out to the group via e-mail to receive feedback.

**Data Collection**

I joined the Community Teacher-Writers as a participant-observer for the Fall 2010 semester. I attended four meetings during the semester, writing and discussing writing with the teachers during the meetings, as well as engaging in giving and receiving feedback via e-mail. The first three meetings were held at the local public library, in a community room reserved by the group's facilitator. The final meeting of the semester was held at the home of the group's facilitator. During each of these meetings I took

observation notes; however, in the analysis only one set of notes from the November meeting, at which all three of the participants in the study were present, are used.

For this study, three participants volunteered to participate in interviews and agreed to observation at the November meeting, three months into my participation with the writing group. At the November meeting, I invited the teacher-writers to participate in this study, and all three teacher-writers in attendance at the November meeting agreed to participate in a 45-minute interview. All three are elementary teachers. Two teachers, Brooke and Tessa, are first grade teachers at the same elementary school, and Margaret is a third grade teacher at another elementary school in the district.

The content of this paper is based upon notes from the November meeting as well as a 45-minute interview I conducted with each participant in early December. During the interviews, I asked the participants both about the writing practices and teaching practices, their history with the writing group, and about the manuscript(s) they have in development. A copy of the interview protocol can be found in the Appendix. Although none of the interviews were recorded, each participant's words were recorded on a computer as closely to verbatim as possible. Two of the interviews were held in the teachers' classrooms after the school day was completed. The third interview was conducted in the public library.

**Data Analysis**

After the interviews were completed, I used five initial thematic codes to create an organizational framework for the analysis. The first three codes, audience, feedback, and publication were selected after an initial reading of the interviews and notes. The final

two codes, whole-group references and emotions were chosen after exhausting the first three codes. For each code, I made a pass through the data, color-coding areas of interest in each interview. After each pass, notes were made and a memo was written for the code.

Once these five thematic codes were established, I created a conceptual map of the data with a web-based organizational tool, Webspiration$^©$. Using this tool enabled me to re-create the data and re-present it in a way to make new connections and establish relationships between and within each of the cases. As new relationships emerged from the data, memos were written and documented as potential areas of analysis. Because all of the five thematic codes encompassed many nuanced relationships, they were broken down into smaller conceptual chunks, connecting back to the initial themes and developing relationships between codes. New areas of interest also emerged, and these were pursued through additional passes through the data and were then incorporated into the concept map.

Eventually, it could be observed that the data often described the teacher as an emerging writer. Throughout this case study, I refer to all three participants as teacher-writers, in that their profession is teaching and writing is a secondary identity in their professional lives. Without many previous experiences in writing for publication, all three of these teachers could be described as having a first identity of a teacher. All three participants are employed as elementary teachers and have been teaching for a considerable length of time, eight years or more.

Each teacher is also a growing writer. The writing the teachers choose to do is deeply related to their teaching practices, and teaching and learning are central themes

evident in all of their pieces. The act of writing provides a space for these three participants to reflectively explore the act of teaching and the politics and policies around their practices. But practicing writing also has the potential to illuminate new paths toward the teaching of writing specifically. Writer is a secondary identity to teacher, but I speculate upon the idea of the writer communicating back to the teacher as she teaches writing as craft.

For these reasons, I have divided the analysis into two parts: first, the more evident and dominant teacher-as-writer. The analysis in Chapter IV closely examines the growth of the teacher through the act of writing, keeping the primary identity of teacher in the foreground. Then, Chapter V re-positions the identities of the study's participants from teacher-writer to writer-teacher. Placing the secondary identity of writer in the foreground of the analysis creates a space for looking at how being a writer can potentially shape the practice of teaching. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to the participants throughout as teacher-writers, as the identity of teacher dominates these participants. But these two identities may be more fluid than presented and can shift from teacher-writer to writer-teacher in the processes of teaching about writing and writing about teaching.

# Chapter IV. The Teacher as Writer

In this chapter, I present the teacher in the foreground of the analysis and examine how the teachers engage in the act of writing. Writing in a community offers teachers an opportunity to network with others, and the community provides safety for experimenting with writing and holds teachers accountable for completing articles. Because the teachers have few experiences in writing for publication, their journey begins with learning to write and I examine their experiences inventing texts and then receiving and providing feedback. Finally, I present the issue of audience as it relates to the teachers writing with the aim of publication. Some of these publications are geared toward audiences of other educators, while other texts are written with more heterogeneous audiences in the mind of the authors.

## Participant Overview

Tessa and Brooke teach first grade together at the same elementary school; Tessa has been teaching for fourteen years, the last four at this school after relocating from another state. She was invited to the writing group in 2008 through an invitational e-mail sent by the facilitators of the group and advertised as a professional development opportunity. Tessa reported that she needed to join the writing group because writing was a goal she wanted to work on, and she was comforted by the fact that a professor with an interest in writing was heading the group. Tessa recently enrolled in a graduate program at the local university and is taking courses toward a Ph.D. in addition to teaching full time.

Brooke, a teacher in her second year of the district, has been with the Community Teacher-Writers since January 2010, when the group formally named itself and began working toward publishing 550-word editorial articles for the community newspaper. She taught fifth grade for six years and completed coursework for a Masters degree in another state, then relocated to the area and started teaching first grade in 2009-2010. Halfway through her first school year in this district, Tessa invited Brooke to join the Community Teacher-Writers as a way to be held accountable for finishing her Masters thesis, and therefore, completing her degree.

Margaret is a native to the area, and she has been teaching in the local school district for 21 years. She currently teaches third grade at a different elementary school in the district. Both Margaret and Tessa are mentor teachers for the professional development school run by a partnership between the local university and the school district. Margaret was invited to the group in 2008 through her involvement in the professional development school.

**Experiences with writing.** Prior to joining the writing group, none of these teachers had any extended experiences with writing for publication. While teaching in another state, Tessa had an opportunity to convene with other teachers over two days to write an article for a newsletter. Beyond this experience, none of these teachers had what I will call a "publishing event," in which a manuscript was accepted to a major, widely read publication for educators or non-educators.

Two of the participants, Tessa and Margaret, cited publication as a faraway goal, one that seemed more like a distant dream than a reality. In Tessa's words, publication was "something I never thought about, maybe someday, maybe years down the road, but

not right now." Margaret said of the goal to publish, "One of the things I had said years ago was that I would love to have my name in print and I never thought I had something worth writing, much less reading, so that's cool."

At this time, all three of the teacher-writers profiled in this brief look into a teacher-centered writing group have been published in the local newspaper: Brooke and Tessa have each been published once, and Margaret has published in the column twice. Margaret has also been published once in a professional journal, and Tessa reported attempting publication in professional journals twice: once independently and she received a revise and resubmit from the journal, and a second time when she co-authored a piece with one of the facilitators and has still not heard whether or not the article would be published.

**Writing in Community**

Once a month, the Community Teacher-Writers meet in the community room of College City's public library. The room is mostly empty, beside a wooden podium and a large round clock, but it is lined with windows on one wall so it is bright and open. During the fall, the late afternoon sun often filled the room with light. Each week, the first group members to arrive pull out several long, portable, plastic tables and arrange them to make a large square that can comfortably seat all of the members around the outside perimeter of the tables. If the library's community room is unavailable, the group meets at a local coffee shop around the corner from the library, and in December, the group met at the home of one of the group's facilitators.

Typically, three to five members come to each meeting, and membership is fluid: some people attend every month and others may make one or two meetings a semester. The group's members, with the exception of the two facilitators, are all teachers at varying grade levels in the same school district, which is relatively small with a handful of elementary schools, two middle schools, a main high school, and an alternative high school. Most of the teachers bring pieces they are currently working on, but some come in without a piece in progress and use the time to develop new ideas for writing. The two facilitators of the group, both professors of education at a local university, also bring writing to the group to share and work on with the teachers.

As a newcomer to the meetings, I only knew one facilitator and two of the group's members. Upon my arrival, it was clear that the members of the group had long-standing relationships with one another: the members talked about people they knew in common, issues in the local school district, and news from the beginning of the school year. At the first meeting, one of the facilitators casually passed around two rolls of mints, which many of the members took. Everyone brought their laptops and worked on the computer rather than in notebooks, allowing the member's to work on pieces on a word processor. Often, the teacher-writers sent out e-mails during the meeting to other members present in order to receive feedback on documents they were currently working on after the meeting.

**Networking.** Although the main focus of the Community Teacher-Writers group is to develop articles for newspapers and journals, the two teachers new to the district involved also saw the group as a place to network, meet others in the district, and find support for their projects. Initially, Tessa joined the group because she needed to work on

her writing, but she also discovered that the monthly meeting was a way to make connections across the district:

> What was really powerful for me at that time of being here in College City was a support network to get to know people throughout the district and get to make relationships in the district. They really became a real support group and it was really motivating because it was a struggle to write and I was being held accountable, it made me commit more.

Brooke also talked about the group as a place to meet people after moving from another state and being new to the school district.

> I knew Tessa and I vaguely knew [a facilitator] and Mary (a pseudonym), but it was pretty interesting and the group was small and it was nice that there weren't too many people. And I met other people across the district and in other schools and they were all working on writing.

> The appeal of the Community Teacher-Writers was not just the opportunity to write articles for publication, but also to make connections across the district. Being located in a town with a major university often brought new teachers to the district, and for both Tessa and Brooke, having a writing group provided needed socializing with others who were teaching in the area. However, several of the group members are also locals to the community, including Margaret, who has taught in the school district for over twenty years. Instead, Margaret came to the group as a professional development opportunity.

> **Accountability.** For Tessa, writing was something she said she did not look forward to doing. Improving her writing was a goal she set out on when she joined the

Community Teacher-Writers group, but she described herself as an unconfident writer and said she was nervous to join the group at first. Margaret's anxiety was similar,

> For me, it was awkward at first because I'm not used to writing that's not at a 2nd or 3rd grade level. It was a little bit intimidating, especially when you would read other people's writing and it was so good. I would think mine stinks in comparison.

Both Margaret and Tessa talked about their anxiety about writing, and Brooke bluntly stated, "I hate writing. I really don't like it." These negative emotions toward the act of writing did not deter these three teacher-writers from joining the writing group, instead, the group members served as one another's accountability tools—knowing that others expect them to write helps the members actually complete the work they are developing.

When Brooke joined the district in 2009, Tessa suggested the writing group to Brooke as a way to finish her thesis. Brooke described the writing group as a place where "someone could hold me accountable closer than in Michigan." Accountability served as one motivator for both Brooke and Tessa; knowing that others were writing and working toward publication helped them to stay focused, but the monthly meeting also serves as a check-in for the writing and a way to set goals for writing. During the November meeting, we teased Brooke about finally getting around to her thesis and playfully offered to harass her so she would sit down and work on it. The monthly meetings helped keep a particularly daunting task on her mind's front burner, so that she would take it out and look at her writing, eventually completing tasks like transcribing and coding her data. In contrast, when the group did not meet over the summer, both Tessa and Brooke said that

their writing "sat on the shelf a lot." Without the monthly check-in, the work of writing was less likely to get done for these two teacher-writers.

**Safety.** Joining the group did not mean that these teachers had no anxieties about writing; instead, they recognized their fear. For Tessa, someone who describes herself as an unconfident writer, writing is a palpable fear, but being a part of the group provides a safe haven for developing into a writer. Out of all the participants, Tessa most often described the group as a "real support network." Having worked with the group for three years, Tessa says her fear of writing isn't as present now and writing is easier. For Tessa, being a part of the community has helped her feel more secure as a writer: "Feeling more comfortable sharing my writing with people, that's something for sure. When we first started, I was so nervous. But now, I don't care."

Although Brooke is a fairly confident writer, she also talked about her level of comfort with others in the group, "I felt kind of comfortable, or comfortable enough with the group to give honest feedback; if my piece sucks, then tell me, or if the logic doesn't flow or whatever." Brooke's level of comfort with providing and receiving feedback with other members of the group is suggestive of a high level of security within the group.

Margaret did not talk so explicitly about her feelings of comfort or safety within the group, but she has frequently sent working pieces out to the whole group via e-mail. Reaching out to the group with a working piece of writing demonstrates a level of safety in the group and a trust of other members.

Feeling safe within a group designed to bring out personal experiences and make those experiences public plays an important role in the success of the group. Without feeling safe in the group, it is unlikely that the group's memebers would continue attending the group or participating in the transformation of making their teaching practice publicly accessible through writing. As Foss and Foss write, "Safety is a prerequisite for transformation because if participants in an interaction do not feel safe, they are reluctant to share ideas, which are the stimuli for the emergence of new perspectives," (Foss & Foss, 2003, p. 37). Choosing to write with an aim to publish requires a safe environment.

**Learning to Write**

After our interview, Margaret showed me the Stickies application on her notebook computer where she kept an active list of topics she could write about, a habit she did not form until after joining the writing group. In fact, for all three of these teachers, writing was not a practice they often engaged in prior to joining the writing group, so in this way, the group has served as a means to learn to write.

**The invention of text.** All of the writers talked about needing to just "blah" out the writing. For the Community Teacher-Writers, the terms "blah out" or "blah" serve as sort of an ineloquent code for free writing or writing first drafts. These terms are used frequently when talking about free writing or sitting down to write new pieces of text, and these terms suggest a security in the idea that the writing does not need to be perfect the first time around. All three participants used some variation of "blah out" or "just blah" to describe the earliest phases of writing.

Often, the time allotted for writing during the monthly meeting is often used as a time when teachers can write freely on a new topic or begin creating new pieces. But both Margaret and Brooke reported noticing when they felt compelled to write and found opportunities to "just blah" or release their thoughts through writing, even when they did not meet with the group. For example, Brooke's current piece examines a district policy to cut spending for school supplies like tissues and crayons in juxtaposition to funding iPads for primary classrooms. The piece began as several "blahs" of writing inspired by e-mailed memos and a colleague's blog about the new iPads. Eventually, with help, Brooke found ways to string several pieces she wrote quickly about this one topic, and she is now crafting a piece for the local newspaper about the two conflicting moves by the district.

Brooke's experience with writing, from the first "blahs" to an articulate argument about funding policies in the district, has helped her to see writing as a process she can engage in to learn about a topic, rather than just reporting out what she already knows:

I've loosened up on myself a lot since I've started teaching writing, but I'm a perfectionist and if it doesn't come out right the first time... I've recently come to the idea that writing is a way of discovering ideas rather than reporting ideas. When I give myself the permission to just blah, but I'm a procrastinator (as you can tell with this thesis) it [writing] is not that bad.

Margaret talked about free writing with a sense of urgency, as though writing helped her to find release of her own thinking. At one point, she described the act of sitting down to write as "this urge inside me to get out this noise inside of me about why they won't let me teach the way I think I need to. All of a sudden, it just hit me and I just

wrote until I had no more time." Free writing provided her with space to release the tension present in her teaching practice, and as she often described herself in a space of conflict, Margaret found a needed venue for articulating the frustration she felt in her position.

Unlike Margaret and Brooke, Tessa is heavily oriented toward completing specific projects and did not talk about finding opportunities to just sit and write. She reported that most of her current work is focused on completing tasks associated with her graduate coursework, like reflective journals and her candidacy proposal, and she is currently working on a book chapter with one of the group's facilitators. However, Tessa still talks about needing to "blah" when she writes and spoke of how allowing herself to just write down her ideas has helped her to get past writer's block. For Tessa, this strategy for just sitting down to put words on the page has helped her to move forward on specific pieces of writing, instead of generally orienting her to writing about multiple topics with the sense of urgency both Brooke and Margaret describe.

**Feedback.** The teacher-writers receive feedback primarily through two modes: most of the time, the writer sends his or her piece out to the group via e-mail and then receives feedback from anyone who has time to comment on the piece and respond to the writer. The meeting time is also flexible enough to allow the writers to bring in pieces and receive some initial feedback during the meeting. Feedback can serve as praise for the piece, but often includes some sort of criticism or suggestion for improving the writing.

Receiving feedback on writing can be a stressful step in the process of writing, and only Brooke seemed very comfortable with giving and receiving feedback, saying,

"That's what's fun about it; I'm not super sensitive about feedback, I felt kind of comfortable, or comfortable enough with the group to give honest feedback. If my piece sucks, then tell me or if the logic doesn't flow or whatever." Brooke also commented that she felt comfortable enough with one of the facilitators of the group to tell her a piece she was working on was "whiny." She talked about potentially sending a manuscript she had put down for awhile back to the facilitator and talked about the facilitator as a provider of feedback most frequently, only mentioning other group members as providers twice, thus giving the impression that she thinks of this facilitator as an important responder to her drafts. In one case, Brooke accepted the feedback from the facilitator over the feedback from another group member and revised her work accordingly.

For Tessa and Margaret, receiving feedback did not necessarily result in revising the piece and feeling comfortable with it. Tessa talked about a piece that she continued tweaking with feedback, but eventually let sit over the summertime and has not picked back up since. Margaret's most current work, an article she is writing about the adoption of a new math curriculum in the district, has received comments suggesting that it takes her too long to get to her point, and she has tried to revise her work according to the group's suggestions, but feels like she can't revise without losing the essence of the work. Instead of using the feedback, Margaret talked about wrestling with it—often finding it difficult to cut her manuscript down or revising her work to quickly "get to the point." Margaret talked about her current article and her inability to effectively revise the piece to make it shorter and fit word limits twice:

> I definitely made some changes based on the feedback, I tried to make things
>
> clearer, less wordy. I wasn't very good at that…. My plan was to finish it and

send it to the school board in May, but the whole thing blew up and I didn't get to

do that…. I would say it's a little more cohesive, that I made things more obvious

rather than implied what I had previously stated. And I think I've tried to shorten

the beginning, which I'm not very good at, but it has gotten somewhat shorter.

Throughout the process of revising the text, Margaret struggled to find a way to cut down

the writing and keep the essence of her piece. In addition, the community audience

complicated her ability to cut down the piece and still make her point about the math

curriculum clear and strong. Margaret understood a message coming through strongly in

her feedback: shorten the piece, but had difficulty figuring out how to do this on her own.


**Writing for Multiple Audiences**

Our meeting was nearly over, but we were using the last several minutes to talk

about Margaret's piece. She was in a dilemma: she had made an argument for the current

math curriculum, but with her position as a curriculum search committee member, was

this a piece appropriate to give to the school board? Would she be better off adapting it

for a journal and, if so, which one? Or was it even remotely possible that she could cut it

down to 500 words and submit it to the newspaper? Margaret slid her laptop to Brooke,

who was already familiar with the piece, and asked her to read the work over and give a

suggestion. When she was finished reading, Brooke commented that sending this piece to

a journal would be like "preaching to the choir." It became clear, here, that the teacher-

writers saw a distinction in what to write and how to write to two different audiences,

some with greater political reach than others.

Initially, the Community Teacher-Writers began with a focus to frame pieces of writing for other members of the profession, and specifically to write articles for practitioner journals based on the teaching experiences of the group's members. In 2010, the group decided to start publishing in the local newspaper in a monthly editorial column. This has presented some unique decisions for members of the group when determining for whom they should write. Because the teacher-writers can choose to orient their pieces toward members of the profession or toward the community-at-large, several members have struggled with where to aim their publishing focus. Here, I present the tensions brought forth by the study's participants in framing the work of teaching for both educator and non-educator audiences.

**"Preaching to the choir."** Although all three of the teacher-writers saw other teachers as a part of their audience, Tessa was the only participant writing a piece that was aimed solely at an audience of educators. Most of Tessa's current focus for writing was related to graduate school; she reported that her candidacy paper was her biggest focus at the time and she only attended one meeting during the fall. The piece she reported having brought to the writing group most frequently in the spring 2010 semester was a book chapter she has been working on with one of the facilitators. When I asked Tessa for whom she was writing her book chapter, she responded:

> This has changed because we've been working on it for a couple of years. At first, mentors, cooperating teachers, administrators and superintendents, but now in the last couple of months, we're narrowing this down to mentors and cooperating teachers to think about how they can use this form of co-teaching for their student teachers.

For Tessa, writing for an audience of educators meant her writing was focused more on how to replicate something she was doing in her teaching practice and sharing with other mentor teachers how she worked with a pre-service teacher. This presented a challenge to explicitly re-create her practical classroom experiences for her audience, extend those experiences to the potential classrooms of other teachers, and link her practices to the literature around her topic. All of these were goals for Tessa's chapter:

> And something else I want to provide are more examples. I've included a specific example of what mentor modeling might look like and I want to include how a mentor model might look at the middle grades or at primary grades because I want to reach a wide audience. And I want to include when you can use this model. During a class on co-teaching a lot more information emerged and I want to include that in that in the chapter.

The writing group was able to help Tessa shape her writing for an audience of educators, and when I asked her about changes made in her writing over the time she brought it to the writing group, she said adding "actual, concrete examples" was the biggest change. For her, revision meant adding more examples and concrete illustrations of her concepts to the writing:

> I think something I've learned from the writing group is to include specific examples and excerpts from… [*sic*]. Part of the chapter talks about how you would conduct a post conference with a pre-service teacher and instead of just writing about what it would look like, I have put in an excerpt of what it would be like and illustrated it.

**"Preaching to the congregation."** Unlike Tessa's writing, both Margaret and Brooke were focused on a larger audience of both teachers and non-teachers. Although her main project is a Master's thesis, Brooke was also working on an article for the local newspaper, her second for the year and our primary topic of discussion during the interview. At this time, it is unknown if Margaret made a decision regarding audience for her piece, but her voiced publishing solutions included writing for the school board, the local newspaper, a professional journal, or some combination of all three. Here, I focus first on Margaret's work and the choices she faces revising for multiple audiences. Then, I will look more closely at Brooke and the tension she faces working within the constraints of newspaper publishing and a dual audience.

*Selecting an audience.* During the final months of the year, Margaret was debating her audience. The elementary math curriculum had been challenged by some parents in the district, and the school board had formed a committee to study other possible curriculum options, a move Margaret opposed, saying, "I wish they (the school board) had said thank you for your concerns, but we don't need to change our whole program." The formation of this committee, which Margaret was appointed to, was the impetus for her current writing project. Margaret explained the situation to me in detail:

> The whole thing blew up. The elementary has been using a math program called Investigations and it's a little different looking because it makes kids think about their work and not just perform algorithms or computations. It's beyond that. There has been a couple of parents that have been very vocal about it and they don't think they have enough math facts, etc. They had good points, but we didn't need to change our whole program.

She talked during our November meeting about her options for publication: 1) she could send her writing to the school board, 2) she could publish it as an article for a professional journal, 3) she could cut down the word count and send it to the local newspaper, or 4) she could combine approaches, sending the article to the professional journal and after publication, send the article to the school board. Her choices for publication were complicated by her position on the committee to select a new elementary math curriculum. When I asked her about the audience for this piece, Margaret replied:

> The College City school board, which honest to Pete, I don't think they would read it. Maybe one would. And I guess I'm also writing it for people who won't read it: parents who question why I do what I do and others who question it…. The main audience is people other than teachers. There is a small segment of our population that don't teach the way I do, and I don't want to tell them how to teach, but I want them to understand why I do what I do.

> Even though she reported wanting to write this piece for people other than teachers, her reply included the phrase "our population," meaning other teachers, and although she doesn't want to dictate how to teach, she does want them to understand her motivations for teaching math the way she teaches it, a way that aligns with the current curricular program:

> A friend of mine has said for years the way we teach through investigation is not a resource, it's a philosophy, and I heard it again and I thought that's what I want: I want to express that the way I teach math is my philosophy, not a program.

Margaret's concerns about the new curriculum and her eagerness to communicate those concerns to others demonstrates a frustration with outsiders' expectations of what school is like and how that expectation contradicts with her philosophy about teaching math. Margaret references past articles she wrote for the local newspaper, one on the importance of parent involvement in the classroom and one on developing good work habits in students, as a way to help her show outsiders what her teaching of math is like:

> What's interesting to me is that each of the three [newspaper] papers are about getting kids to think, not just perform, and about having parents come into my classroom. That was the first one. I've been careful not to say math, but it's been hard to say school is different and come and see it. And now I've had parents say, 'Oh, I get it.'

Although Margaret sees this publication as one way to communicate to the public about her experiences and expertise in teaching, her cautious attitude about writing "math" in the newspaper suggests that Margaret recognizes the delicate political situation she is entering through local publication. In addition, she is aware of the conventions of publishing for this local and broad audience of educators and non-educators, stating that the local newspaper "would never publish it. It's too long," and then debating the appropriate time and place for delivering her writing to an audience:

> And maybe as we get through this piloting process, it would be an appropriate time to cut it down and send it to the school board anyway. And there may be some journals that help with connecting a teacher's philosophy to practice. Maybe *Math Educator*, I don't know, but I've seen it.

Margaret is also aware of the need to be explicit about her beliefs, and used similar strategies to Tessa: illustrating clear and specific examples of her concepts to her audience and using professional literature, in addition to including student work from her classroom. Margaret used her non-educator audience as a guide to selecting her evidence to support her philosophy about teaching math: "And I wanted to have examples for people who don't teach, so I made photocopies of kid's work and put that into the paper and I got some resources. Not a whole lot, but I have some this time." When talking about her writing after feedback, she reported, "I would say it's a little more cohesive, that I made things more obvious rather than implied what I had previously stated."

Drawing upon techniques discussed in the writing group, both Tessa and Margaret, original members of the writing group, were concentrated on being explicit in their writing by providing examples for their writing, whether engaging in exposition or argumentation. When learning to write, even for diverse audiences, the need for clarity in writing emerged as a central concern for the work of the group.

*A dual audience.* Brooke, who attended all of the meetings during the fall semester, spent many of the meetings discussing her piece about the district's choice to fund a new technology initiative, iPads for elementary students, but its unwillingness to provide elementary classrooms with other supplies like crayons or tissues. She intended to write this piece for the local newspaper, which she saw as an opportunity to write for both an educator and non-educator audience: "The primary audience is the public, but by default teachers are going to be reading this." Then she joked, "The teachers around here seem to read the paper." These dual audiences meant Brooke had to appeal to two different sets of interests:

Because it's going in the [newspaper] I'm trying to write it so that it's publicly accessible, and I want them to understand issues around technology and the resources at our disposal, but it's also for teachers because teachers read the paper.

With e-mails being sent out about the new iPad initiative for the upcoming school year during the summer and a colleague's blog about technology in the school, Brooke made the decision to write for the newspaper in order to reach the larger audience. She joked about also starting a blog to write about her concerns, but reiterated that it was only a joke—this was her opportunity to speak out about concerns with the district's spending and to speak to administrators, colleagues, parents, and community members at one time. Originally, the article started out as two pieces:

I have worked on the technology in the classroom piece, and I wrote that one in August as a kind of a 'blah' and then brought it to the writing group in September and that's when I worked on it. It was all about the iPad/crayons debate and it was all economics at first. And then I wrote another piece that was more 'the district wants you to use the technology' and I've woven in the instructional and economics piece.

However, writing for the newspaper column meant the article had to be strong and concise; the word limit for the column is only 550 words and it would circulate widely, including online publication. Brooke spoke about the challenges of weaving together the larger policy focus and the instructional concerns she had during the revision process with the writing group:

It was all very economic, straight ahead argument because I felt that is what would get to people, but I had to answer the instructional piece. It's tighter, because I had to make choices about what had to stay and go, what was essential and non-essential. That was frustrating.

Brooke also spoke about different reactions to her writing from inside the group. Where some of the group members liked her original economics-focused piece, which she circulated for feedback via e-mail, she revised her article to include a second piece with an instructional argument after receiving feedback from the facilitator:

One of the group members, Julie, told me not to merge them, but I decided to merge them anyway. I think [the facilitator] liked it better with the merging because it was lacking a 'why' or the 'why bother.' It was interesting that someone thought it was a strong argument without that.

Despite all of the work put into this piece, Brooke reported that she has "walked away from" the article for now. Although she commented that she could send it back to the group's facilitator, she also said that she felt frustrated and needed some distance from the article, but that she would eventually come back to it in order to have it published. When I asked Brooke about her expectations for her audience's reception to her piece, she replied, "I'm not really sure. I have a feeling I'm going to get some not so great community feedback. I think the logic is sound, but for some people, you don't question things around here." Ultimately, publishing for this dual audience requires letting go of a piece and allowing it to interact with the intended audience(s). Brooke shows an understanding of the political environment she is entering by publishing a controversial opinion in the local newspaper. Despite the positive feedback within the

40

group, publishing for an audience of non-educators could mean publishing for an audience that does not share the same views as the teacher-writers.

## Chapter V: The Writer as Teacher

A goal of professional learning is not only to transform the teacher, but also to transform the practice of the teachers as the work in their classrooms. Any learning that occurs for the teacher, even in an informal setting such as the Community Teacher-Writers group, may have significant impacts for students. Although I was not able to visit the classrooms of this study's participants, their talk about teaching writing points to the potential implications for student learning.

Only Margaret reported that the writing group had an impact on the way she taught writing in her classroom, and she had difficulty articulating exactly what she thought was different about her teaching of writing, saying: "I don't know if I could tell you what, but I know that I'm different as a writing teacher." Both Brooke and Tessa reported that the writing group had not had much of an impact on the teaching of writing in their classrooms. Brooke said, "I can't think of any ways it's impacted my day to day work in the classroom, not any explicit ways," and Tessa responded, "I probably have to say the coursework [in a graduate program] probably influenced my teaching practices more so than the writing group, I think."

This chapter aims to demonstrate the common themes emerging in the talk of the teacher-writers about their own writing and how they talked about the teaching of writing in their elementary classrooms. Margaret's acknowledgement that the way she taught writing had been directly influenced by the writing group stands in contrast to both Brooke and Tessa, who claim other sources of professional development for their growth in the teaching of writing. Although they attributed their understanding of the teaching of writing on other forms of professional learning, I found that all three participants had

similar ways of talking about the teaching of writing that paralleled how they talked about their own writing processes. Even though the participants diverged on how much the writing group explicitly impacted their teaching, my attempt here is to draw connections in the talk about teacher-writers' personal experiences in writing and their talk about teaching writing. Opportunities for future research are rich in this data, and I aim to illuminate new questions about the influence of a teacher-writer community on teaching practices.

**The Teaching of Writing**

All of the teacher-writers had different levels of experience and comfort in teaching writing. Where Margaret acknowledged, "writing is the weakest part of my teaching practice," Brooke spoke clearly and with a discipline-oriented vocabulary about her experiences teaching writing. When I asked Brooke about how writing was a part of her teaching practice, she first jokingly responded, "I write lesson plans," but followed up more seriously:

> I teach writing to first graders and I taught writing to fifth graders. When I first started teaching, I didn't really have any good models for how to teach it, curriculum models or I kind of had a workshop model. My district had 6+1 writing traits, and I taught writing by traits, and I didn't really have a concept of genre. Now we're using Lucy Calkins, we're working on X genre or we're writing together and I'm giving them tips and strategies for making the genre better and the traits are wrapped up into it. That's how I'm teaching writing now.

Brooke's response indicates a long path of learning leading up to her current practice, mixed with a change in grade levels from fifth grade to her present assignment teaching first graders. She talks about her teaching being genre oriented, and throughout our discussion, she talked about conferring and publishing with students, which were also common threads in the discussion of her own writing.

Margaret's talk about the teaching of writing focused more on writing across the curriculum and used very little of the discipline-oriented vocabulary that Brooke used to talk about the teaching of writing. Margaret also indicated a lack of training in the teaching of writing:

> I feel that we don't get instruction on being effective writing teachers because everyone can write. And I've really struggled with how to be a better teacher of writing. Although I should say that when I think of that kind of writing, that's writing in our writing time.... All subject areas have an aspect of writing.

Additionally, during our November meeting, Margaret rejected a notion that teachers of writing know what is good or bad writing. She told us that she did not feel that all teachers have a sense of what is good or bad writing. Margaret talked frequently about revising her own texts and helping her students process and revise their texts during our interview.

Tessa also spoke little about the teaching of writing and, like Margaret, used less of the discipline-oriented vocabulary that Brooke used to talk about writing. However, Tessa did, again, talk about writing across the curriculum as an important part of her teaching, "With first grade, I try to be conscious of how much writing they do in math and science. But for language arts, it is big… it has evolved a lot." During our interview,

Tessa spoke about writer's block and generating text frequently, which, as demonstrated previously, are also salient issues for her as a writer.

A common practice among teachers in professional circles is to borrow and adapt lessons from one another, which is frequently encouraged as a part of the culture of teaching. Tessa was the only member to state that a result of the writing group was a lesson she adapted from another member of the group. Although the other group member taught at a different grade level, Tessa used one of his articles to inspire a poetry lesson she taught to her first graders:

> Derek (a pseudonym) talked about his approach to writing poetry and even though he teaches middle school… I wish I could remember the name of the book he used, but it really got the kids to talk about their feelings. His first piece, it was called "Wonder Ink," I asked to use some of his ideas for a poetry unit for first grade and it was amazing to see the feelings that the kids took out for their poems. That was definitely a big thing I took from the group.

For Tessa, the writing group provided one avenue for adopting and adapting lessons for her own students. Although neither Margaret nor Brooke mentioned this practice as a part of their writing group experiences, Tessa marked this as an important moment in her teaching experience where the thought of the writing group was present in her mind during teaching. Generally, teachers are borrowers of lessons and often trade ideas at conferences, within journals, and district professional development work. The writing group provided one more space for the common professional practice of lesson sharing. In this practice, the culture of teaching is very much alive in the professional learning of teachers through the act of writing.

**The Writing Process and Instruction**

When asked about what was different in their teaching since joining the writing group, all of the participants talked about different phases of the writing process. Here, I examine how each of the teachers reported taking up different parts of the writing process with their students and how this relates to their own words about themselves as writers. Here, I have divided the writing process into four parts that reflect the development of writing for this teacher-writer community: modeling the writing process, text invention, conferring, and revision and editing. Additionally, it should be noted that not all parts of the writing process were discussed with each teacher-writer.

**Modeling the writing process.** Both Margaret and Brooke reported that they modeled writing as a part of their classroom instruction. For Brooke, this is a practice she has been doing for a long time, mentioning that she had showed her writing from her own schoolwork to her students when she taught fifth grade. Even though she is teaching a much younger group, she still said she writes in front of them.

For Margaret, modeling her own writing was a newer practice that she could engage in because she now had writing to show her students. She talked to me about showing her students the piece she was currently working on:

> I also showed them [my students] the piece I published and showed them how
> long it was and how long it took me to do it. I told them I wrote pieces for the
> [local newspaper] and maybe the one that I'm writing about writing now I would
> share. And that's something I never would have done.

Because writing is a new activity for Margaret, her teaching is likely developing due to her own growth as a writer. Modeling for students her own writing process can only be

authentically undertaken if Margaret herself has writing to model. Because the writing group has been formative to Margaret's development as a writer, it is likely that the teacher-writer community has had an impact on Margaret's teaching of writing.

**Text invention.** Tessa talked about how unconfident a writer she is and reported that writing was a difficult act for her. Tessa confessed at one point, "…it was a struggle to write," and also said, "I was phobic of writing before, I don't see it as scary of a thing. The whole thing I just talked about with the writing block, just getting past that, just get it down and get it out there." It is also noteworthy that Tessa was the least prolific publisher of the three teacher-writers, having only published once in the local newspaper; however, Tessa writes frequently in her graduate program and has been constructing a book chapter for several months. For Tessa, just creating new texts is an important hurdle for her as a writer, and the invention of texts appeared in her talk about teaching writing, as well.

Overcoming these personal battles with writing has helped Tessa to see how she can also help her students to begin to write. When I asked Tessa about an experience from the writing group that came to mind in her teaching, she replied: "How [the facilitator] says 'blah, put it out there' was from the writer's group. I heard her say that before the writing class. I could help kids just 'blah,' just something on the paper. Getting past writer's block." Over the time she has participated in the teacher-writer community, Tessa has had her own confidence as a writer lifted through the support network of the community, and this re-emerges as a strength she has as a writing teacher. Because she personally owns a strategy for text invention and moving beyond the plague of writer's block, Tessa sees herself as capable of doing the same for students.

**Conferring.** Writing as a social process is an important part of writing with others, and this proved to be of value to both Brooke and Margaret. Although Brooke did not attribute her work as a teacher to any learning from the writing group, she focused on conferring as something she is currently working on with her students, "I've been focusing on conferring with my first graders, and pulling small groups to confer. I don't think that's come out of the writing group, though. I've been doing it for years." Similarly, when I asked Brooke about something that she did now as a teacher that she did not do before joining the writing group, she responded, "Read other adults' writing. I read other people's writing. I read [my partner's] writing, but now I read other teachers' writing." Brooke saw new value in reading other people's writing seriously, and she also spoke of peer conferencing as an important part of her classroom writing instruction.

Margaret also mentioned that she felt it was important for writers to read one another's writing, and this echoed back in her talk about teaching third graders to confer with one another, "I know it's important to have other people read your pieces, but I don't think third graders are very good at reading each other's pieces."

**Revision and editing.** For Margaret, learning to revise her own writing was a struggle that also occurred as a theme in her teaching. When she talked about her own process of writing, revision was the place she talked about making decisions and tough choices. When I asked her about how her current piece had changed in the last few months, she responded:

> I would say it's a little more cohesive, that I made things more obvious rather than implied what I had previously stated. And I think I've tried to shorten the beginning, which I'm not very good at, but it has gotten somewhat shorter.

48

Her future plans for the same piece included more revision:

> Cut a fourth of it out. When I cut a fourth of it, it will be important what fourth I pick. I may have to pick and choose what examples I leave in and what I take out. But I don't want to change the flavor so that it's just whining about math. I just want it to say my philosophy.

As revision proved to be an important phase of the writing process for Margaret, her teaching practice also focused on teaching her students to revise their work. Margaret reported that she went to another teacher at her school and asked the teacher about how she had her students revise their writing. Margaret then used this information to experiment with teaching her own students to revise their work:

> I was talking to one of the newer teachers and how they rewrote a paper looking at different parts of speech. And I asked how kids do writing a piece a bunch of times. I tried the idea and the first rewrite their pieces improved like 500%, but then the next stages, not so much.

Margaret also put editing her current piece on her "wish list" of things to do with the piece soon, "One thing [the facilitator] had us do at the beginning was look at every single line, every single comma. That I haven't gotten to yet, and that's on my wish list." She talked about how the facilitator led the writing group in editing their work, and once again, this is something that was echoed in her teaching practice.

> And then we got to editing, we talked a lot more about what you need to do: read it aloud, read the first two sentences, do they make sense together? Getting them [students] to see that writing is little pieces at a time.

In Margaret's own writing process, she worked through many re-writes of an article and often toiled with an article for several months. For example, she had been working on her current piece since the spring of the previous school year and was still trying to re-write it into something publishable. Margaret's writing process valued re-writing and re-working pieces, and this appeared in her talk as an important part of writing to teach her elementary students.

**Publishing and Instruction**

All three of the teacher-writers in this study talked animatedly about what publishing their own work meant for them. Brooke spoke about the unexpected excitement of publishing her first article in the local newspaper:

> Turned out to be a bigger hubbub than I expected. Another teacher in the school put a sign in the mail room with my article and name, and I got a lot of positive feedback: e-mail from teachers and parents, it was unexpected how many people read the paper and saw it. And I got mail from a prisoner…. [Publishing] was exciting and interesting and cool. It was the first time I had anything published that had my name on it.

Similarly, Margaret talked about seeing her name in print for the first time, "One of the things I had said years ago was that I would love to have my name in print and I never thought I had something worth writing, much less reading, so that's cool." For both Margaret and Brooke, publication was a source of pride and personal accomplishment.

Although Tessa had only published once in the local newspaper and did not talk passionately about her own publication, she talked about the excitement she felt for other

members of the group when they published articles. Her response about publishing

expresses the pride felt by the community when someone publishes:

> Oh gosh. It is exciting and it is motivating. Not even for yourself, but also for you
>
> friends and co-workers, to see them being published is a good feeling, it's
>
> motivating for everyone. It's like someone had to value what we had to say.

As newly published writers, the opportunity to see their own names in print stood

out as moments of pride for all three of the teacher-writers in this study. Additionally, all

three also mentioned the act of publication as something they do with students in their

classroom. During the November meeting, talk about assessing writing quickly turned to

publishing students' writing. Tessa talked about putting on a green visor and becoming

the publisher for her students' writing. When she acted as the publisher, her first graders

read their writing out loud to her and she typed the writing up for them. Then, Brooke,

sharing the same challenges of deciphering first graders' writing, showed us podcasts in

which her students read their writing out loud. Classroom publishing emerged as one

commonality between all three teacher-writers in this study.

Margaret expressed her focus on publishing in the classroom as a part of her

belief about why people write, "I'm trying to help the kids see that the reason we write is

for other people to read it and so to do that you have to make sense." Despite this belief

about writing to publish, Margaret also talked about how difficult it was for her to go

through the entire writing process toward publication with her students. The difficulty of

publishing student work was overcome on more than one occasion, according to

Margaret. On publishing with her students, she reported:

And the whole act of publishing, and I still hate the part of publishing kids' work because it takes so long. But that being said, I made them rewrite the piece that we did all those rewrites on. And we just turned a 3 series experiment into a multiple paragraph essay, and I told them, "You know what? You guys did so great we should rewrite it and put it out in the hall.

Although Brooke did not attribute her orientation toward publishing student work to the writing group, she did respond that she was more recently been publishing student work, "Another thing that's different is that I've been publishing their work more, and I don't think that's a result of the writing group, but I showed you those podcasts." Brooke was becoming more comfortable teaching in a first grade classroom, but she was also becoming more comfortable with the act of publishing. It's possible that there is a relationship between her own publication and her push to publish and share student writing in the classroom.

For all of three of these teachers to speak about publishing student work as an act of importance in their classrooms is significant because all of these teacher-writers are new to having their own work published. It's possible that their personal experiences with writing, which are largely positive, are having an impact on their instructional choices in their elementary classrooms, ultimately shaping their students' knowledge, skills, and dispositions toward writing. The relationship between teacher publication and publishing student work in the classroom deserves further research.

## Chapter VI. Discussion

**Writing as Professional Learning**

Teacher-writers come into being a teacher-writer by a multitude of routes, but for these teacher-writers, the formation and invitation to the group proved to be a first stepping-stone to learning to write as a teacher. For both Tessa and Brooke, the opportunity to meet other teachers was especially important, given their statuses as newcomers to the district, so the group has served as more than just a place to write, but as a place to make connections. These relationships became a web of support for the teacher-writers, strengthening their commitments to one another and to the writing they were engaged in.

The three participants of the Community Teacher-Writers profiled in this study were all learning to approach the act of writing in new ways, and were learning to develop a sense of ownership of their own ideas. Learning to write was as much learning to formalize their own thoughts about teaching and to make them evident to others, whether within the teaching profession or to a more general public. Although the idea of "having my name in print" was attractive to both Margaret and Tessa, neither thought of that as a nearby reality. Margaret commented, "I never thought I had something worth writing, much less reading," even though she is now the most prolific of the three teacher-writers. The journey to writing professionally began with recognizing that they all indeed had something within them worth reading, then following up to refine and polish their own thinking, so that it is presentable to others.

Learning to write freely about a topic allowed Brooke to develop a new orientation toward the act of writing, recognizing for the first time that she didn't have to know everything about a topic before she started writing about it. Instead, she found she could pick up pieces along the way, and in the process of learning, revise and string her thoughts into a coherent piece ready to deliver to her audience. By allowing herself to write without hesitation or fear—"blahing" on the page—Brooke gave herself the permission to discover her own thinking about a topic important to her teaching. It is in this freedom to write that there is such potential for professional growth; writing as a piece of professional development activities, whether formalized or gathering informally outside of district professional development plans, could provide a needed space for teachers to synthesize understanding about theory, knowledge, and practice.

**Publication In and Out of the Classroom**

All of the publishing events recently experienced by the study's participants are significant to the writers and to the group; however, the road to publication is long and winding, sometimes the trip to print is delayed or ultimately unsuccessful, and writing can be a frustrating and arduous process. With very little experience in writing for publication, each of the teacher-writers had needs that were successfully met by the writing group by learning to write about their own teaching and experiences in the public school setting, and ultimately, because of the writing group's existence, publishing on the basis of their own expertise in the teaching profession has been successful.

Still, the teacher-writers are likely to encounter new audiences as their range of avenues for publication expands. Both Brooke and Margaret were considerably focused

on publishing for the local newspaper and the surrounding community, and this presented unique challenges in writing for heterogeneous audiences, whose members included some who the authors perceived to lack educational backgrounds, mixed with educators of varying backgrounds. When writing for this larger audience, both Brooke and Margaret experienced some doubt about how their pieces would be perceived; Brooke concerned that the audience feedback would be overwhelmingly critical and Margaret concerned that the intended audience would not even read her writing. In addition, both teacher-writers were experiencing frustration with the writing process at points of revision and publication.

Finally, although Brooke and Tessa attributed other learning as the primary knowledge base for writing instruction in their classrooms, two points of interest are left to be examined in how the teacher-writers talked about writing instruction in their classrooms: 1) all of the teacher-writers talked about improving areas of writing instruction that they were focused on as writers themselves, and 2) all three teacher-writers in this study talked about the importance of publishing in their classrooms. The process of writing for publication may have some influence on writing instruction in their classrooms, the teacher-writer's own successes and frustrations in writing percolating through the process of teaching students to write.

However, the focus on publication in the classroom is notable, as it is not a commonly emphasized piece of the writing process in classrooms. This presents a new question for future research: how, if at all, does teacher publication provide a new or renewed importance to publishing student writing? This small snapshot of teacher talk within a writing group suggests that teachers choosing to write for publication may have

a relationship to how often and how seriously they choose to focus on publishing student writing.

**A Recommendation for the Community Teacher-Writers**

These three members of the writing group generally give the impression of having difficulty with receiving feedback and revising accordingly. This may present an area of focus for the facilitators. Now in its third year, the members of the group demonstrate an ability to develop their ideas into articles, but still need to develop critical skills for giving the feedback needed to rely on one another, rather than the facilitators, for advice. Leading the group in developing skills to provide useful feedback between members and helping them to respond to the feedback in effective ways may lead to more publishing opportunities in professional journals for the group members. In order for the group to be sustainable, the group members must continue to seek out advice and feedback from one another as often as they do from the facilitators. Although the group regularly feedbacks through e-mail, it may be helpful to the group to bring the process of providing feedback front-and-center to the writing group's monthly meetings.

**Moving Forward**

As I move further away from this particular writing group, academically and geographically, I recognize the potential for writing communities and how incredibly rare these groups can be. As I began to plan this study last spring, I posted a discussion thread on the English Companion Ning asking other English teachers if they ever wrote with their colleagues. Several responded that they didn't, but would like to, and only one

wrote that she did—Penny Kittle, a well-known teacher-writer—and she encouraged me to do the same.

What's holding us back from creating these communities? There are the obvious things that get tossed around as problems in every writing about school reform I've read: time, money, testing. But really, I think the problem might be that teachers don't have much voice in the current rhetoric around public education. We have unions, but are they really providing us with an authentic collective voice? When do we ever hear from teachers in the public sphere about issues related to our professional obligations and practices? How many teachers have access to public spaces in which they can articulate their views of teaching and learning? I suggest that creating supportive communities, whether formal or informal, could potentially give rise to the teacher as a vocal, responsible, respectable professional.

In our current rhetoric, we find many stories of exceptional teachers who overcame the impossible and experienced great success in the profession: Erin Gruwell, Jaime Escalante, Frank McCourt. We admire these teachers, but they are often seen as exceptions to the rule. Currently, there is more focus in our rhetoric on lazy, incompetent teachers and the need to seek them out and remove them from the profession. Our public policy is moving further in this direction, as well. In a recent article in *English Education*, Jonna Perillo writes, "At the same time that teachers' expertise is underestimated, the teaching profession is more dependent on public perception than others largely because the public has a unique economic and political relationship to the people who work in the nation's schools," (2010, p. 13). We can observe this dynamic relationship in current policies and practices being enacted in this current time of turbulence for public

education. The current Blueprint for Reform, a document endorsed by President Obama and positioned as a key element in the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, encourages the creation of data systems for linking teacher performance to testing and accountability systems(U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, 2010). Additionally, more effort is being put into identifying weak teachers through value-added measures, and as the public sector takes an economic hit this year, the method for teacher lay-offs, whether teachers should be removed by seniority or performance, has been debated in several states (for example, see Schencker, 2011; Tasci & Lovell, 2011; Janovich, 2011). A dominant theme in American education rhetoric and policy is the desire to divide the "good" teachers from the "bad" teachers in an effort to get more quality for tax-payers' dwindling dollars.

So how should teachers act in such an environment of negativity? Rather than complaining quietly or resisting all measures, it is more important than ever that teachers assert their authority as knowledgeable professionals into the public space. Writing, whether in professional journals among researchers and practitioners or in public space like newspapers, blogs, and other widely read publications, is one avenue for strengthening the reputation of the profession from the inside out. In order to participate in the conversations around educational reform, teachers must find their voices. Again, Perillo writes:

> Making public what they have learned and taking responsibility for it is essential to gaining a more empowered position in public school culture and design….

Teachers are our best resource for making current conversations about education

more meaningful, more intellectual, and more productive (2010, p. 26).

Creating informal professional communities like the Community Teacher-Writers is one

avenue for teachers to assert their professionalism and strengthen the rhetoric of teaching.

If teachers are expected to have a voice in educational reform movements, they will have

to orient their writing toward this dual audience of educators and non-educators in order

to be effective participants. We are in a critical juncture for teacher-writers, especially for

those willing to engage in the political discourse of educational policy-making.

I believe in the teacher as a knowledgeable professional with valuable insights

about how we can continue to improve the state of public education in the United States.

It is upon this belief that I move forward, returning to the classroom this fall, with great

hopes for working with my colleagues to raise up the profession of teaching from within.

I believe that when we collectively work to bring our voices into professional

publications and political spaces, educators can change a negative public perception of

the profession. As William Ayers writes in his book *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*,

"If teaching is to become vital and honorable, it is the teachers who will have to make it

so. It is the voice of the teacher that must at last be heard," (2010, p. 21). As I continue

upon my own journey through teaching, I hope to raise my voice and support the voices

of my colleagues, not only for the elevation of the profession, but also to ensure all

students receive a high quality education.

I appreciate the lessons I have learned from the Community Teacher-Writers, and

I hope to use this new insight to the workings of a writing group by developing or joining

a local community of teacher-writers wherever I find myself situated in the coming

months. I'm dedicating the next decade to teaching, to writing, and to improving the state of public education from inside the walls of public schools, so that those most in need are always guaranteed the schools they deserve.

## Appendix

The following protocol was used in the individual interviews:

Name:
Teaching Position:
Length of employment in the district:

1. How long have you been a member of the Community Teacher-Writers writing group?
2. How did you hear about the Community Teacher-Writers group?
3. Can you tell me about how you first started coming to the Community Teacher-Writers group?
4. What, if anything, have you published since joining the group?
  A. Can you tell me more about this piece/these pieces?
  B. What was the experience of publishing like?
5. What pieces of writing have you worked on since September of this year?
I would like to ask you a few questions about the piece(s) you have worked on since September of this year:
  A. Can you tell me about how you started to write piece X?
  i. Who is the audience for this piece; in other words, whom are you writing this piece for?
  ii. Would you consider the audience to be teachers or people other than teachers?
  B. When did you decide to bring piece X to the writing group?
  C. What happened to piece X after you conferred with the writing group about it? What were your next steps, as a writer?
  D. What is different about piece X in September as compared to now?
  E. What changes did you make on your own to piece X?
  F. Can you tell me about how piece X changed, if at all, as a result of bringing it to the writing group?
  G. What might you do differently with piece X if you were to revise it?
  H. Where do you see piece X going from here?
6. How is writing a part of your teaching practice?
7. Is there anything you do differently when you teach writing, as compared to before you joined the writing group?
8. Can you tell me about a time in your teaching when an experience from the Community Teacher-Writers group came to mind?
9. As a writer, what do you do now that you did not do before you were a part of the Community Teacher-Writers group?
10. As a teacher, what do you do now that you did not do before you were a part of the Community Teacher-Writers group?

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