Chapter 14
Digital Partnerships for Professional Development: Rethinking University–Public School Collaborations

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ABSTRACT
The following case study explores the impact of a university-school-community partnership developed in an online environment in order to address the immediate need of high school teachers in North Carolina to become more knowledgeable about responding to student writing in online and digital environments. Using a grassroots, teachers-teaching-teachers model fostered by the National Writing Project, members of the Tar River Writing Project, in partnership with a university faculty member and an administrator from a local public school district, developed and implemented an online professional development workshop to improve teacher response practices. This study demonstrates one method for using online technologies to engage community and university partners in the collaborative work of improving writing instruction and suggests a series of benefits inherent in such partnerships.

INTRODUCTION: MOVING TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ONLINE

The recent economic recession in the United States has had numerous ripple effects beyond the Wall Street bailouts, car company woes and other stories that have occupied significant space in the national headlines. While experience suggests that district- and school-level support for public school teachers to attend conferences and other professional development events has dwindled over the last decade generally, the recent economic downturn has caused that support to dry up almost completely in our area of eastern North Carolina. This shift has caused the Tar River Writing Project (http://
www.trwp.org), a university-school-community partnership for teacher development in eastern North Carolina, to rethink the sort of standard, face-to-face teacher seminars, workshops, and institutes that it has traditionally conducted in area schools and districts. Increasingly, schools in TRWP’s service region (23 counties between I-95 and the NC coast) have been struggling to fund substitute teacher pay and travel costs that arise when classroom teachers leave school for a day or more to participate in their own professional development (PD) with other educators. While such continued professional development is key to better teachers, schools, and student learning, the cost for such work in time, space, and money has come to feel increasingly prohibitive to many principals and district-level administrators.

This case study outlines one of TRWP’s recent attempts to provide high-quality PD events by using Moodle, an online content management system (CMS), and thus work to reduce those peripheral costs of teacher training previously absorbed by schools and districts. Despite some difficulties, this experience has been largely productive and successful, allowing TRWP to meet some of the key outcomes of its mission: 1) increased collaboration between K-12 teachers and university researchers in a variety of environments; 2) improved teacher development through effective engagement with high-quality professional development materials; 3) increased integration of digital technologies in teacher development projects; and, 4) greater opportunities for developing teacher leadership capacity throughout the TRWP service region.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT OF RESPONDING TO STUDENT WRITING ONLINE (RSWO)

In the fall of 2009, the state of North Carolina was beginning the process of implementing a statewide Graduation Project1 for high school seniors, one that would involve a rich portfolio of different kinds of writing, including a major researched paper. But as often happens with top-down, large-scale approaches, the NC Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) and the NC Department of Education (NCDOE) had not allocated sufficient funding or time to provide detailed professional development for NC teachers who would be responsible for guiding students through the new Graduation Project process. As state-level discussions progressed, one local school district, NRMPS, was considering a move that would have their students’ researched essays, a core component of the new NC Graduation Project (NCGP), responded to/evaluated by external constituencies. Some district administrators in the NRMPS system were concerned that students in their schools were not getting sufficiently rigorous responses to their writing; they worried that their own teachers would be tempted to “go easy” on their own students’ work; central office wanted some outside (read “objective”) evaluators to make sure that the students would receive valuable feedback that would inspire revision prior to the end-of-year Graduation Project assessments. NRMPS knew the qualities they sought in evaluators (e.g., teaching experience, knowledge of research writing, experience with assessing writing), but they were not necessarily sure who those evaluators should be or how NRMPS could ensure the evaluators would provide the services they sought.

This is where the Tar River Writing Project came into the picture. As with other sites of the National Writing Project (http://www.nwp.org), TRWP is built on a “teachers-teaching-teachers” model, one which values the contributions that classroom teachers can make when they are given the chance to wed experience with published research in order to become teacher-educators. TRWP’s Teacher Consultants (TCs) are certified teachers who have been through an application-based, highly competitive Invitational Summer Institute (ISI) in which they read current research on the teaching of writing and reflect on the connections between their personal experiences and
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