Putting Writing Research into Practice

Applications for Teacher Professional Development

Edited by Gary A. Troia,
Rebecca K. Shankland, and Anne Heintz

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Introduction

Gary A. Troia, Rebecca K. Shankland,
and Anne Heintz

Stakeholders in American education have identified the need for a large-scale commitment to improving student writing achievement, which has remained relatively flat for the past decade. Literacy in the 21st century requires facility with written expression for varied audiences and purposes in and out of educational and employment contexts; thus, the consequences of inadequate writing proficiency for personal and professional growth are dire. Professional development also is at the forefront of stakeholders' agendas because many of today's educators are unprepared to teach writing effectively and are faced with the growing ranks of English language learners, students with disabilities who are included in general education classrooms, children and youths who live in unstable and/or impoverished home environments, and those who simply do not view writing in school as meaningful (see Bridge, Compton-Hall, & Cantrell, 1997; Clare, Valdes, & Patthey-Chavez, 2000; Graham, Harris, Fink-Chorzempa, & MacArthur, 2003; Moats, Foorman, & Taylor, 2006; Troia, 2007; Wray, Medwell, Fox, & Poulson, 2000).

In response to these two concerns, Michigan State University's Literacy Achievement Research Center (LARC) hosted a symposium in 2007 titled "Writing Research We Have and Writing Research We Need." Much of the work represented in this volume was presented at that symposium and developed in conversation with the literacy community in attendance. The primary goal of this book is to acquaint the reader with research in writing spanning multiple genres, populations, and instruc-

tional issues, as well as applications of this research to designing profes-
sional development opportunities for teachers of writing.

WRITING: AN AREA OF CONCERN

The importance of proficient writing extends far and wide. It helps deter-
mine eligibility for graduation and is pivotal in decision making regard-
ing grade retention and promotion in some states (Conley, 2005); at least
35 states now include writing assessments in their statewide test batteries
(Olinghouse, Zheng, & Morlock, in press). It also is a significant predic-
tor of performance on statewide *reading* assessments used to monitor
adequate yearly progress under No Child Left Behind (NCLB; see Jen-
kins, Johnson, & Hileman, 2004). A common characteristic of high-pov-
erty schools where a majority of students pass high-stakes assessments in
content areas is a strong emphasis on writing (Reeves, 2000). In postsec-
ondary settings, proficient writing serves as a gateway for employment
and promotion and is expected for matriculation into and completion of
college degrees (National Commission on Writing for America's Families,
Schools, and Colleges [NCWAFSC], 2003, 2004, 2005; Smith, 2000). The
ACT, SAT Reasoning Test, and Graduate Record Exam (GRE) General
Test all have recently added a writing subtest to their exams in response
to the increasing emphasis on and concern with writing in U.S. colleges
and universities. Finally, writing is now more than ever an important
part of civic and social life as the telephone has been largely supplanted
by writing with technology. Many of us today use some form of tech-
nologically enhanced written communication (e.g., e-mails, text mes-
sages, blogs, micro-blogs) for daily social interaction and the expression
of ideas, concerns, requests, and the like. Expressive writing also may
reduce psychological and physical distress and, consequently, health care
utilization, as a recent meta-analysis found that writing about stressful
topics may help meet the transient emotional needs of otherwise healthy
individuals previously addressed through mental or primary health care
(Harris, 2006).

    Although writing competence is essential for success in and out of
school, writing is and has been the most neglected of the "three R's"
(NCWAFSC, 2003). This inadequate attention to writing has contrib-
uted to lackluster performance among America's school-age population;
according to published National Assessment of Educational Progress
(NAEP) 2002 data, less than one-third of 4th, 8th, and 12th graders
achieved at or above a proficient level in writing performance (Persky,
Daane, & Jin, 2003). Results from the NAEP 2007 Report Card showed
similar trends (Salahu-Din, Persky, & Miller, 2008). Specifically, though

there were small increases in the number of students who wrote at or above a basic level (i.e., partial mastery of fundamental skills) in grades 8 (88% vs. 85% in 2002) and 12 (82% vs. 74% in 2002), there were no substantive increases in the number of students who were judged to be writing at or above a proficient level (grade 4 was not assessed in 2007).

Widespread limited proficiency in writing also has been noted in postsecondary environments, with three-quarters of college faculty and employers rating students' and employees' writing as fair or poor (Public Agenda, 2002). The NCWAFSC (2004) conducted a survey of 120 major U.S. corporations about the need for writing skills in the workplace; they concluded that writing is a "threshold skill" (p. 3) for hiring and promotion among salaried (i.e., professional) employees. Survey results indicated that good writing is a ticket to professional opportunity, while poorly written job applications are a "kiss of death" (p. 3). Consequently, businesses invest some $3.1 billion annually in remedial writing programs for their employees (NCWAFSC, 2004), and higher education institutions are forced to provide noncredit remedial courses in written composition (enrollment in which may increase dropout and time to degree completion, delay entry into the work force, and add substantially to the cost of postsecondary education; see Adelman, 1999; Reder, 1999).

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: AN AREA WITH POTENTIAL

Standards-based reforms emphasize rigorous curricula founded on challenging content standards to prepare students for the demands of higher education and work in the 21st century, increased assessments to ensure that students are meeting the standards, and a heightened emphasis on holding educators accountable for the achievement of all students (Schumaker, Deshler, Bui, & Vernon, 2000). Efforts to increase student achievement in more rigorous academic curricula are dependent upon improving teachers' knowledge, skills, and motives in ways that will help them upgrade their classroom practices. This new emphasis has led education scholars and policymakers to demand effective professional development opportunities for teachers. Unfortunately, there exists an all too common phenomenon in which policy instruments delineate expectations for professional development without also providing suggestions for successful implementation:

> The NCLB Act of 2001 requires that states make available "high-quality" professional development for all teachers. NCLB does not,

however, address what constitutes high-quality professional development or how professional development should be made available to educators. Similarly, "Teaching at Risk: A Call to Action," a report released by The Teaching Commission (2004), reminds us that teaching is "our nation's most valuable profession" (p. 12).... The Teaching Commission proposed a multifaceted approach to helping teachers succeed, one that includes high standards for teacher classroom performance and student achievement, and "ongoing and targeted professional development" to help teachers meet the demanding new standards. Again, little is said about the content and character of that professional development. (Borko, 2004, p. 3)

This lack of sufficient attention to the "how" of professional development carries serious risks. Without active promotion of best practices regarding the content and character of the professional development so desperately needed by educators, the whole enterprise faces the prospect of continuing to engage in practices that hold little hope for impacting teaching and learning in substantive ways. We see this in the work of Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, and Orphanos (2009), who assert that the United States lags behind other nations in providing teacher professional development in ways that will improve student learning. Their work provides a comprehensive synthesis of the research on professional development, details the components of effective professional development, and discusses what can be done to increase the effectiveness of professional development for our nation's teachers. "Most states and districts are still not providing the kind of professional learning that research suggests improves teaching practice and student outcomes," state Darling-Hammond et al. "To be effective, however, it must be sustained, focused on important content, and embedded in the work of collaborative professional learning teams that support ongoing improvements in teachers' practice and student achievement" (p. 1). Too much of the professional development that teachers in the United States experience is of short duration, utilizing workshops and presentations on discrete topics isolated from the realities of classroom practice rather than intensive content- and context-based learning that teachers tend to value (e.g., Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002).

While the focus on the "how" may be underrepresented in discussions of professional development, there is a body of research in this area upon which to draw. In their 2002 longitudinal study, Desimone et al. found that professional development in specific instructional practices contributed to increased use of those practices in teachers' classrooms when the professional development included active learning opportunities for the

teachers and a focus on reform-oriented instructional methods aimed at increasing students' intellectual engagement with content. In his 2007 report on professional development research, Correnti summarized the core principles that appear to make a difference in teachers' practice and their students' achievement. These research-based principles include (1) teachers are lifelong learners; (2) teachers should direct the content and methods of professional development; (3) ample time must be devoted to peer collaboration within school contexts to situate and personalize professional development content; and (4) professional development should be sustained and coherent (p. 264). These principles are consistent with what Darling-Hammond's team found in their 2009 synthesis, and also are in keeping with the standards of many professional organizations (e.g., the National Institute for Science Education).

While these principles are general in their applicability, the research base from which they were derived largely focused on content areas other than English/language arts, such as the sciences (see Norton-Meir, Tippett, Hand, & Yore, Chapter 5). With respect to writing, there is not a large body of work on professional development. One widely respected model of professional development in writing comes from the National Writing Project (NWP), which uses a cascading professional development model (i.e., teachers teaching other teachers). The NWP (see *www.nwp.org*) is a network of affiliate sites (often connected with universities) that provide intensive professional development to educators through (1) summer institutes in which invited teacher-leaders spend concentrated time writing and reflecting on their writing, reading research and other source materials about writing, collaborating with others regarding pedagogical issues in writing instruction and assessment, and developing demonstration projects to share their expertise and stimulate debate and inquiry; and (2) year-round professional development activities such as workshops, coaching and mentoring sessions, and study groups organized and led by teacher-consultants who have participated in a summer institute. Borko (2004) cites the NWP as an example of professional development that focuses on showing teachers how to maximize their potential with local needs, priorities, and contexts in mind, as opposed to developing extensive curricula and materials for implementation. Much of the research on the impact of NWP professional development is conducted through interviews and surveys. Generally speaking, teachers report positive changes in their philosophy about writing instruction, increased time spent in teaching writing, and more frequent use of exemplary teaching practices. In addition, analyses of student writing samples have typically found improvements in organization, coherence, and the use of writing conventions (see Borko, 2004).

Similarly, the work conducted by Correnti (2007) shows the impact of teacher professional development in writing on a select group of elementary school teachers. His effort was directed not so much at describing the character of effective professional development but rather at attempting to identify the effects of professional development on instruction and student learning. He analyzed data from teachers of grades 1–5 in 112 schools, gathered as part of a large-scale quasi-experimental study of the effects of professional development on instructional practices. Using propensity and naive statistical models, Correnti found that, compared to teachers who did not receive intense professional development, teachers who did receive such professional development spent 13% more time on writing instruction and required students to write 12% more text. These teachers also were more likely to use the following instructional practices: (1) have students practice writing, (2) have students edit their writing for errors in mechanics, (3) have students make substantive revisions to their writing, (4) have students explore literary techniques or do genre study, and (5) provide direct instruction in writing.

A disciplinewide commitment to combining best practices for teaching writing with exemplary professional development delivery models is urgently needed by teachers and their students. Thus, with an understanding of (1) the need for improved writing proficiency across both schooling and employment fronts, (2) the key role that teachers play in addressing this need, and (3) the potential for professional development to provide teachers with resources to best serve their students, we introduce the chapters in this volume on writing instruction and professional development.

WRITING RESEARCH TO GUIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: OUR VOLUME

In this volume, we have organized the chapters into four sections. First are the chapters that identify and address critical and contemporary issues in writing, including high-stakes writing assessments, the application of computer technologies to writing, and motivational issues in writing. Next, chapters devoted to writing in specific genres—poetry, scientific exposition, and hybrid historical narrative and exposition—are presented, followed by a section that focuses on specific subsets of writers who present unique challenges to teachers (and college instructors). We end with two chapters that describe the priorities and values shaping the dominant contemporary discourses on writing research and professional development.

Part I: Addressing Complexities Facing Schools and Educators

Writing instruction and professional development in writing are emerging fields where much remains to be discovered, and both novice and expert teachers are faced with new challenges and find themselves confronting a variety of "need-to-know" dilemmas. Common among these are:

- "I have to prepare my students for a statewide writing test. I just got used to the federal assessment in which our school participates, but I heard the expectations are entirely different. What do I do?"
- "We are required to show use of technology in lesson plans. I'm comfortable with helping students use word processing, but the Internet is another story. How should I proceed?"
- "I have a group of reluctant writers this year, and every day seems to be a struggle to just get them to write something. How can I help them view themselves as writers with something important to communicate?"

The chapters included in Part I address these critical and contemporary issues of writing assessment, technology, and motivation.

In Chapter 1, Olinghouse, Zheng, and Reed discuss the general characteristics (i.e., response mode, time allocation, scoring method, audience specification, and topic or procedural choices) of states' writing assessments and explain how each of these characteristics may influence students' approach to direct writing assessments. They argue that it is important that teachers understand the specific characteristics of writing assessments that their students will be required to take so that they can adequately prepare them to do their best on them. The authors then propose a set of research-based recommendations for preparing students for large-scale writing assessments that represent fully ethical test preparation practices. They follow with a professional development framework that utilizes peer coaching as one method for improving teachers' abilities to prepare students for large-scale writing assessments.

In Chapter 2, MacArthur and Karchmer-Klein focus on the affordances and challenges for writing instruction and students' writing development presented by the new interactive Internet technologies, known as Web 2.0, including blogs, micro-blogs, wikis, and social networking sites. With a balanced assessment of the limitations of these tools, the authors share two important reasons for teaching students to use these new technologies in school. First, the ability to use such tools for communication and learning is an important educational outcome: today's students

need to have facility with these technologies to be considered literate and to participate fully in work, social relationships, and a democratic citizenship. Second, technology, if properly integrated with instruction, may enhance students' learning. The authors explore ways that these new technologies might be integrated into writing instruction and discuss implications for teacher education and professional development.

Troia, Shankland, and Wolbers review the research on self-efficacy beliefs, one of the most predictive and well-studied aspects of human motivation, in Chapter 3. They focus on self-efficacy research in general and then specifically in relation to writing. Next, they turn their attention to the self-efficacy of struggling writers and identify recommendations for addressing the low self-efficacy beliefs and limited motivation to write often demonstrated by poor writers. Following their review of research on motivation to write, they discuss how the professional development model known as "lesson study," used widely in Japan, can be used to enhance teachers' self-efficacy beliefs related to teaching writing and, in turn, benefit the writing motivation and performance of their students.

Part II: Working with Subject–Area Genres

In current large-scale examinations of writing, such as state- and districtwide tests as well as the ACT and SAT, the assessments of writing are tests of "general" writing ability. Traits such as organization, style, and conventions are measured via prompts that may ask writers to take a position on an excerpt of literature or on a current event (see Smagorinsky, Chapter 11). Educators must learn particular strategies for preparing students for this "genre" of writing: a composition that is divorced from a meaningful context for writing it (e.g., an authentic audience and purpose) and produced under timed conditions in isolation (see Olinghouse et al., Chapter 1). The chapters in Part II of this book attend to other genres that are more traditional in the writing instruction canon but that also vex teachers because of their complexity and unique connections with other disciplines. In two of the chapters, the authors cast light onto the innovative methods being used by practitioners to integrate writing with disciplinary inquiry and communication and illustrate how and why writing is the very means by which academic disciplines are shaped. Giving attention to best practices and new directions in writing within content areas not only leads to improved writing instruction but also serves a rhetorical purpose for students, teachers, and researchers, for it requires a shift from writing to demonstrate proficiency to writing to display and construct knowledge for a disciplinary community. In the other chapter, the authors take a refreshingly scholarly look at composing and teaching poetry, a genre with which many teachers (and students) needlessly feel