

Writer, Teacher, Person: Tensions between Personal and Professional Writing in a National Writing Project Summer Institute

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The notion that “teachers of writing must also write” has been pervasive since the 1970s. But *what* should they write? On this question, the consensus has been less clear. In the National Writing Project (NWP), a professional network focused on the improvement of writing instruction and featuring summer institutes in which teachers engage in writing of their own as well as demonstrations of effective teaching practices, tradition has usually favored personal writing, particularly memoir, poetry, and fiction. This emphasis on personal writing has, at times, left the NWP vulnerable to criticism that the writing occurring in its summer institutes is too self-focused, characterizing the personal or creative writing done by teachers during the summer as insufficiently focused on classroom problems and practice. In fact, professional writing has been a part of the writing teachers have engaged in at NWP summer institutes since 1974 (Healy, 1992, pp. 258–259), but the relative emphasis that NWP summer institutes should place on these two kinds of writing has been a point of friendly contention among those involved in NWP, with some NWP site directors arguing for the importance of personal writing, others requiring that teachers also undertake some professional writing, and still others going so far as to insist that most, if not all, writing at the summer institutes take up professional topics.

This article redirects this conversation among NWP site directors about the respective roles that personal and professional writing should play toward more productive territory, demonstrating some aspects of the role of writing in professional development that spread beyond the NWP context to research and program development more generally. A case study of one teacher’s experience during an NWP summer institute illustrates the dichotomy be-

tween “personal” and “professional” topics and forms of writing as a false one, producing significant tension for teachers embarking on such writing in a summer institute. Tension may be inevitable but necessary, a productive tension that helps to drive the powerful transformative learning experiences

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that so many NWP participants report. It is not just personal or professional writing that leads to professional growth. Instead, tensions between these two sets of forms/topics and the ways such tensions are taken up, talked about, attended to, and remedied by teachers in a writing group can produce development that crosses both personal and professional domains.

Conversations about what kinds of writing teachers should be invited to do in the NWP summer institutes have tended to characterize teachers’ writing as *either* personal or professional, as though there were a clear dichotomy between the

two. This purported distinction between domains or genres is one inherited in part from the curricula of schools, which tend to delineate sharply between narrative and poetic writing on the one hand (typically emphasized in the primary grades) and expository and argumentative writing on the other (the established currency for testing in later grades and college admissions). Rather than perpetuating this distinction between two kinds of writing and debating the relative role each should play, I argue that what is important is the way in which the writing—be it personal or professional—is taken up by the writer and by others who read the work. This is consistent with the sociocultural views of writing now common in composition studies and English education, in which genres are shaped by the particular needs and realities of particular discourse communities, in which forms follow from exigencies, and in which any individual act of writing and learning occurs in its own particular context of community membership and participation.

I will first review some relevant studies addressing teachers as writers in personal and professional domains and then present a case study and discuss it in light of the issues I have raised here. My case study is an example of the complexity with which norms of “personal writing” or “professional writing” interact in the real experience of a teacher/writer who has been invited to do both, tracing how the writing she undertakes is always *both* personal and professional in its purposes and in its consequences, particularly as members of her writing group respond to and encourage her. Influenced by her own notions of “personal writing” and “professional writ-

ing,” confirmed and perhaps exacerbated by the way writing opportunities were offered by the NWP site, this teacher tended to dismiss her writing experiences as not “counting” as legitimate learning experiences worthy of attention in the summer institute context based on their topics or forms. However, the experiences in her writing group show that it is the *purposes* for which writing is undertaken, at least as much as topic or form, which affect how that writing is taken up in a professional development setting or what any one teacher learns from the experience of writing.

Background

Teachers as Writers

The notion of the teacher-as-writer—along with questions about why teachers might write and why they should or should not be expected to do so—has been with us at least since the late 1960s, when process and social approaches to the teaching of writing emerged, and into the 1970s when the National Writing Project was founded and began to grow. The issue famously surfaced in the pages of *English Journal* in the early 1990s in response to an article in which teacher Karen Jost asserted that writing was not necessary for teachers and suggested that the idea of doing so was essentially an ivory tower idea imposed by university faculty (Christenbury, 1990; Krest, 1990; Robbins, 1992; “Should Writing Teachers Write,” 1991; “Why Writing Teachers Should,” 1990). In a later article in the *Quarterly of the National Writing Project*, Gillespie (1991) offered an argument about why writing was essential for teachers: writing helps teachers to “establish our own authority” (p. 4), writing helps teachers to improve their ways of responding to student writers (p. 5), and writing helps teachers to enhance their professionalism. For those teachers and teacher educators who agree with Gillespie, a rich practical literature has emerged for teachers who would like to write for publication (e.g., Dahl, 1992; Henson, 2005) and for those who hold writing workshops for teachers (e.g., Root & Steinberg, 1996).

While a rich tradition of considering the teacher as a writer exists in the professional literature, the research literature is limited. Robbins (1996) studied the writing lives of teachers and found that teachers who write or who called themselves writers were not necessarily more process-oriented in their teaching. Other researchers have studied the writing and professional lives of teachers who have participated in institutes of the National Writing Project (e.g., Perl & Wilson, 1986) or other writing-based professional development (e.g., Sunstein, 1994); these studies highlight the recursive relationship between writing and teaching writing and underscore writing’s

function as a site for teacher reflection. In fact, the literature on NWP suggests that writing is a fundamental component of the NWP model's success in professional development. Lieberman and Wood characterize writing in NWP summer institutes as "not only . . . a medium for self-expression but also . . . a vehicle for learning-in-community" (2003, p. 19), and Whitney (2006) found that writing and participation in writing groups were critical to the process of reframing epistemological structures that is central to the transformative learning experiences of the NWP.

Teachers and Professional Writing

Previous literature has either taken up writing generally or has focused exclusively on personal and/or literary writing; less is known about teachers' practices as the authors of professional articles or about the impact of professional writing on the lives and work of teachers. Work on teacher research indicates that when teachers systematically inquire into their practice, they gain both insight into their practice for the purposes of instructional improvement and a sense of professional authority and agency that often benefits other teachers in turn (Bissex & Bullock, 1987; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Goswami & Stillman, 1987). Such teacher inquiry often, though not necessarily, is representation of the work in a written product. While not explicitly focused on writing, the work of the Carnegie Academy for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning also documents how when teachers articulate and represent for others their professional practice, they interrogate and ultimately improve their practice while influencing colleagues to do the same (Hatch, 2006). Stock (2001) extends this notion of representations of teaching practice by encouraging us to view frequently overlooked genres, such as the workshop and the anecdote, as important genres of professional publication for teachers. Fecho (2003) and Check (2002) note how the conventions of the academic article can be barriers to participation in the published professional conversation by teachers; Burton (2005) and Casanave and Vandrlick (2003) document how this barrier affects teachers of English as a second language, for example.

Links between Personal and Professional Writing

Personal writing has frequently been considered as a precursor to professional writing or to the essay. Moffett (1989), for example, speaks of "bridging" to the essay from personal narrative. In his conception, writers work inductively from a "plenty" of memory, narrative, and sensory material. To Moffett's argument about the cognitive link between personal writing

and professional writing, there exists an affective corollary: Writing in the “comfort” of the personal domain might increase confidence for writing in the more intimidating professional domain. Thus a teacher like Alisa Daniel (2004) notes that she first wrote “stories of my childhood and of my children’s childhoods,” then eventually that writing “moved from personal stories of home to personal stories of my classroom. Here I began a new type of writing . . . articles for NWP . . . [H]ad I not had the personal writing experiences of my first summer institute, I know I would never consider tackling articles and research papers” (para. 5–6).

In fact, although the NWP’s reputation perhaps foregrounds personal and creative writing, such as memoir and poetry, participants in the first 1974 University of California Institute on the Teaching of Writing (which would become the Bay Area Writing Project and then the National Writing Project) were explicitly asked to produce both personal/creative pieces and a “position paper” on some aspect of professional experience along with a curriculum project (Healy, 1992, pp. 258–259). Today, many sites encourage or even require teachers to work on a professional piece in summer institutes, but practices vary widely as to how much this activity is emphasized and how it is supported. One critique of the NWP has been that its focus is insufficiently directly applicable to the classroom, prizing introspection and unfocused reflection on matters ranging far beyond the classroom by engaging teachers in writing about themselves and their backgrounds rather than direct examination of classroom practice. Yet the bulk of most summer institute time is, in fact, spent on collaborative examinations of teachers’ classroom practices through demonstration lessons, and it is inappropriate to expect the NWP will deliver a tightly focused professional development curriculum since the NWP summer institute is designed to be a collaborative network, not a class (Gray, 2000; Lieberman & Wood, 2003). Still, it is perhaps in response to such a critique that the relative emphasis each kind of writing should receive remains a topic of debate among NWP leaders. Proponents of personal writing would assert, for example, that personal writing is both more accessible to teachers who might be beginning writers and is more like the writing most students are asked to do (enabling modeling of assignments and activities and increasing teachers’ empathy for student writers). The other side of this argument, articulated for example by Tom Fox, former director of the Northern California Writing Project (personal communication, September 14, 2006), explains that professional writing is both more difficult for teachers to engage in on their own (and thus should be undertaken in the supportive community of the summer institute) and has greater potential to engage teachers in conversations around policy and

reform. In addition, professional writing is more like the academic writing in which students are asked to engage on state assessments, and it thus parallels the gatekeeping assignments that poorer students and English language learners are asked to undertake without the necessary tools and experience.

Beyond its summer institutes, in recent years NWP has sponsored a number of professional writing retreats designed to support teachers in developing articles for publication. Retreat organizer Kathleen O'Shaughnessy notes that while questions about the proper balance between personal and professional writing in NWP settings are a frequent point of discussion among site leaders, she finds that the professional writing teachers take up at the professional writing retreats is *simultaneously* personal and professional: "The best teachers I know use who they are as people to shape who they need to be as professionals. The blend of the personal and the professional goes on all the time in our classrooms, so what better stance to take for writing about our practices there?" (O'Shaughnessy, 2003). What O'Shaughnessy says about writing for publication, in a retreat setting, is just as true in the summer institute setting. As in life, personal and professional concerns are not only mixed but are bound together, aspects of the same single stream. Thus in the summer institutes, teachers not only experience tension between personal and professional writing, they also *use* that tension in collaboration with colleagues to reframe notions of themselves as teachers, writers, and people. In other words, the tensions that crop up between personal and professional topics and forms for writing—along with the ways teachers work through these tensions in discussion with other teachers in a writing group—are not only inevitable, they are necessary components of the transformative experiences for which NWP summer institutes are known.

A Telling Case: Laura

One teacher's example helps to demonstrate the complexity of how opportunities to write in both personal and professional domains were presented in an NWP Summer Institute. While this teacher, Laura, was invited to write in a variety of forms to a variety of purposes, she focused most of her writing energy on writing addressing personal topics. Yet she cites this "personal writing" as central to the professional transformation she experienced in the Institute and to professional writing that she went on to undertake after the Institute. Her story highlights the tensions between personal writing and professional writing and, more importantly, the ways the blurring of these distinctions produces important opportunities for the teacher and her colleagues to talk together about writing and senses of self in the context of the NWP Summer Institute.

Laura was a participant in the 2004 Summer Institute of an NWP site located at a major research university in California. This teacher spoke with me in interviews near the beginning of the summer and near its end, allowed me to collect and analyze samples of her writing composed throughout the Institute, and communicated with me in a follow-up one year later. The data were collected as part of a larger study of teacher learning and writing in the Institute, reported elsewhere (Whitney, 2006, 2008); that study focused on the notion of “transformation” in NWP and identified components of transformative learning embedded in the Summer Institute, most particularly through the processes of sharing writing and receiving feedback in writing groups.

This NWP site is directed by a senior professor in English and education and co-led by a group of retired classroom teachers with significant experience in offering professional development programs. The site has been holding five-week Summer Institutes each year since 1979. Teachers have the option of earning some graduate credit for their work, but the Institute is not attached to a formal graduate program or course of study (the site director characterizes it as “a think tank, not a class”). The format is collaborative, during which teachers share slices of their practice in presentations, consider presentations by visiting experts, and discuss the implications of what they have seen. They write daily, both in unstructured and structured situations, and meet a few times a week in writing groups for peer feedback. The Summer Institute this teacher attended began in May 2004 with a one-day orientation meeting. At that meeting, teachers introduced themselves, received information about the Institute format, engaged in some brief writing exercises, and discussed aspects of their teaching practice that they might present to their colleagues during the summer. They also were asked to begin a practice of daily writing (which many participants called “journal writing,” although not all of the writing was therapeutic, confessional, or diaristic in nature), which would involve writing daily in 20-minute sessions in the month before the Institute began. The Summer Institute then convened for five weeks of all-day sessions in June and July; activities included daily open writing time, presentations of classroom practices by peers, workshops presented by visiting practitioners and scholars, and work in writing groups in which teachers were expected to share pieces of writing with peers and provide feedback on one another’s drafts. Writing in a variety of modes was a constant feature of the Institute, ranging from short “quickwrites” before a discussion to narrative and poetic prompts included in presenters’ workshops, drafts of a professional article, and journalistic profiles of another teacher. These writing opportunities arose organically from the demonstration lessons and workshops in which

teachers participated, but two kinds of writing were solicited from site leaders explicitly: (1) the journal writing assignment described above and (2) a draft of a “professional piece,” defined as a journal article, a letter to the editor of a newspaper, or a lesson description, which took up a professional topic such as a classroom practice, a public policy issue, or other teaching concern.

When she came to the Summer Institute, Laura was teaching fifth grade and had been an elementary school teacher for 8 years. Prior to that, she worked in schools as a paraprofessional part-time while raising her four children, who are now young adults. In her teaching situation, Laura was rarely called on to write beyond the occasional filling out of forms, evaluation of students, or brief communications with parents. She did engage in writing outside of school, such as letters to people close to her and an annual holiday newsletter. In her teaching, Laura reported that she used a structured writing strategy with her students:

Although it sometimes feels stilted and that it flies in the face of my innate desire to make writing creative and true to the author’s voice, I have found that the use of a planning organizer (an example would be a “4-Square”), and a very specific rubric throughout the process, allows the students more opportunities for successful, organized communication.

Laura had success with this approach but was concerned that it made writing too formulaic, not creative enough. After all, she wrote for fun when she was a child, trying to write a book of poems at age eight (until she found “the effort would surely impinge on my playtime”) or a medieval adventure story. She wondered if her students were similarly creative and ambitious. She professed a love of reading and claimed that literacy was the source of her greatest joy in teaching. “Four-square” paragraph organizers (a template for writing effective paragraphs commonly presented in inservice workshops in this region) failed to tap into that joy. While Laura says she worried about these approaches, she attributed her use of them to “NCLB-related pressures.”

Laura reported entering the Summer Institute feeling that writing for herself would be difficult or even impossible. She initially looked forward to spending the summer writing, thinking the Institute would be an impetus for doing the journaling she had long meant to do but never got around to, but as problems in her teaching life and family life loomed larger and larger in the spring, she began to dread having to write at the Summer Institute. In the car on the way to the May orientation, she thought this over:

I remember driving down there thinking I hope they don’t ask me to write, because I’m just not in the writing mode and I was really frazzled in terms of my job and personally there was a lot going on. I had thought coming

into this, at the very beginning of having applied, that things were going to be kind of serene in my life [chuckles], and in my typical mode, they're not. So I had thought "Oh this is going to be the perfect summer for me to write, because I'm going to be in this really good place to be writing." And so even May 30 I was thinking, "Oh, I'm not going to be able to write."

Meanwhile, Laura's role as a mother was consistently on her mind, and it remained there throughout the summer. At the May orientation meeting, in the first exercise, Laura wrote about one of her sons in a poem:

this poem came out of me about the day I became mother to one of my sons. And from then on, the best writing—I don't know if it's anything great, it's just the best of me, the best of what's inside of me—has been about my parenting.

Also that May, Laura was made aware of the Institute's invitation (assignment) to undertake a piece of professional writing. In a letter from the site director mailed before the May meeting, teachers were asked to begin "some piece of professional writing . . . to which [they] have enough commitment to see through the process of refinement and revision with an aim toward publication within or beyond the Institute." The letter goes on to suggest possible forms for this professional writing, including "short articles" about a teaching practice, "position papers" taking on a controversial issue, "teaching stories," "case studies," or "meditations/reflections/think pieces." Laura made some notes prior to the Institute, but she did not begin the summer with a draft of a professional piece.

Once the five-week Institute began, Laura engaged in daily writing, both in free journal writing and in response to prompts from peers who were modeling assignments they might give their students. For instance, in the first week, she undertook a piece describing an important incident that had occurred in her family. Laura reported struggling at first with the writing. As she wrote, she knew she would be asked to bring a piece, perhaps that piece, to share with her writing group. She was nervous about writing overall and particularly about sharing her work: "I was very nervous about sharing my stuff with others. . . . I'm a thin-skinned, non-confrontational wimp, so I was afraid." In the past, she had frequently kept a journal and had always loved writing, but something about writing in the Summer Institute seemed different. One of her first pieces had to do with an incident involving one of her sons. She had a first draft, which she took to her writing group. In an interview that took place one week into the Institute, she recounted:

I wasn't even sure that I wanted to do anything with [the piece] or continue it, or whether it was important inside of me to finish writing it (I don't know

if that makes sense). . . . I actually brought the first little section or page of it to the writing group. And I said that very thing: I'm not really even sure why I'm showing this to you because I'm struggling with what . . . I guess I'm struggling with where I should be in terms of what I'm writing. Or what the purpose of my writing should be in terms of my personal growth, in terms of my professional growth, or whatever, and this is definitely a personal thing, it has nothing to do with teaching.

Laura indicated she was aware that her writing was personal, not about teaching—and wasn't the Summer Institute supposed to be about teaching? Laura noted here two related issues: deciding what was important to *her* to write about, and deciding what she "should" be doing in the setting of the Summer Institute. While personal topics were encouraged, and many colleagues were similarly writing about family and friends, Laura was also aware of the Institute as a professional retreat rather than a solely personal one and was influenced by the in-depth conversations about teaching that comprised the bulk of the discourse of the Institute. She also noted that writing is tied to growth: The question of topics is, in part, a question of "my personal growth, my professional growth, or whatever." On the way to orientation she had worried that her chaotic life would get in the way of writing, and there she was, writing *about* that chaotic life in a professional setting. She asked her group to help her navigate these issues:

I said I guess what I want is for you [the writing group] to tell me, is this something I should just kind of leave, and say O.K. this is just a recollection, and just leave it like that and go on and do something else? And when I read it they . . . I kind of got this consensus that they said no, continue telling the story of this day that happened. So I did.

Once this conversation took place, writing itself changed for Laura. Her journal writing began to change, even physically:

The first entry is really nice and neat and I used my favorite pen . . . it was beautifully written—and then the ones that are recent are, like, completely scratched out, scribbled out, lots of lists in the margins. I'll start a piece, and then I'll leave it off and start another piece on the next page, and then I'll have to label where I pick up the next. . . . I'm not used to writing in a journal like that, and writing pieces I'm going to pick up again.

I asked Laura what the difference was, why she had begun to scratch out more and skip around. She explained:

How I started writing in the journal is, it felt like I didn't have anything to say, so I spent a lot more time on the physical act of writing. And I think that's why. I actually do like to physically write, I mean I like to write, I

like the act of [hand]writing, but when I'm composing, or when I have something to say, then I'm not worried about what it looks like. And you do the editing and revising as you go or maybe after the fact.

She elaborated that her way of thinking about and using a journal had changed. She tied "having something to say" (above) to the presence of a potential reader (below):

I've done personal journal writing off and on throughout my life. Probably more "off" in recent years! So that kind of reflective writing . . . I just do it for my own self. And then I'm probably not as . . . I'm more aware of these [points to notebook] as potentially being read by other people. . . . And my journal writing that I've done in the past, I don't ever anticipate that anyone's going to read it. So they can take on a different tone.

I might do some stream of consciousness, I probably—I would say in this journal there's not much . . . [long pause, struggles for words] I am trying to think of in the past what I might have done. Journal writing in the past might have been some kind of cathartic way to get over a struggle, like an emotional struggle that I'm having—a fight that I had with my husband or something, some habit I'm struggling to overcome. And I haven't written anything like that in over a year.

At the end of the summer, she remarked further on the importance of that shift in her understanding of the journaling task:

I have, in the past, kept journals, and the experience has always inspired some kind of growth; spiritual or emotional, mostly. However, this journal-keeping [at the Summer Institute] differed, in that I used some of what I wrote as a springboard for additional reflective writing, or to work further on a piece that I might later share with my group.

Laura explained that an important feature of the writing she was doing in the Institute was that it had the potential, and often the expectation, to "go public," noting that even her journal writing was influenced by a sense that she might choose to revise and share it later. Thinking of a potential reader who might see things from the outside helped Laura herself to take a more "outside" view on the issues she wrote about, adding more explanation (and perhaps more reflection) than she might otherwise have done. And she described a process for planning that she used with public writing, whether personal or professional:

I usually set up some kind of "what do I want to say" mini outline in the top corner of my page . . . not like a formal outline, just a way to keep myself coming back to something and not go all over the place . . . [for example] if I write a letter to somebody that's not just hi how are you, but if it's a letter

that is seeking clarity in a relationship or asking forgiveness, then I actually do bullet things. . . . I do the same thing when I'm writing professionally.

Laura began a professional piece by drafting a vignette about an event in her classroom, but she soon put this writing aside in favor of writing that would be more readily classified as personal in topic and creative in form. Most of Laura's writing during the summer had to do with mothering and with taking herself and her professional aspirations and abilities seriously. When she began writing, she frequently turned to the topic of mothering. This initially bothered Laura:

And, what I was finding myself writing about or wanting to write about was only like, home stuff or mom stuff, stuff like that. And um, I have to use that word "only" because that's how I was kind of feeling, like, "only."

With encouragement from Summer Institute presenters and her writing group, however, Laura eventually gave herself permission to pursue the topic, to engage in self-examination of herself as a mother. A guest presenter suggested that they might keep a list of topics they wanted to write about in the future:

[A]nd so I did that. I actually started to do that one morning as we were writing, and I got like, two different things on there [on a list of writing topics] and they both had to do with being a parent. And I'm like, you know, I just need to stop fighting this, I just need to do this. So . . . one of them was this thing, it was what I started reading at our mid-summer [reading] about my son. And once I kind of stopped writing that, I realized that there were a couple of different things that I was writing about. One, one, the mom thing. You know, I kept writing about mom things, and then there were other teacher things like this, and that's how this one started.

Over the course of the Summer Institute, she wrote several public pieces about her children and reported that much of her private writing addressed this topic as well. A piece about an important family incident, for example, includes several analytic statements about the family's dynamics and her role in them. She describes her family leaving church one morning:

Making what was, at times, a herculean effort to get to church together was one of my puny attempts to round us up, remind us of our collective commitment and love: to refocus (at least myself) on what was important and real. An hour and a half later, looking at [her husband]'s grim face as we walked out of church, and watching our sons move separately, and mostly wordlessly out to the car, I realized in disappointment that my lofty goal of unification and fostering familial love once again was not to be attained this morning.

Laura used this piece of writing to unpack not just the event in question but also aspects of her family's dynamics as a whole:

It had become easy to pin the tension between each dyad in our home on [a family member with a severe illness]. . . . the constant stressful quest to find him the help he needed had surely taken [its] toll on each of us. His brothers stayed away; went to friends' homes and never dared to reciprocate the hospitality. [My husband's] and my own social life had dwindled to an occasional phone call, some family outings, tense holiday dinners, and an occasional stolen hour or two when one (never both) of us would get away with a friend. Our own communication centered around the latest doctor's appointment, who was driving whom where, how the current medication or therapy trial was (not) working. It rarely focused on us, and when it did, it often descended scarily into snippy backbiting or sarcastic blame-casting. Our sons had followed us into this pattern in their own interactions with each other.

In writing about a particular event in the family's history, Laura sheds light—for readers and for herself—on the family as a whole and her role in it. A poem written during the institute that she shared with me, about a son she adopted, further demonstrates this. Titled “To [my son], Who Is No Longer Four,” the poem opens with the line “Letting go is hard to do.” It continues, “. . . the holding on / came / with such difficulty / and / I had to practice it / so / diligently / until / it wasn't artificial / and / now / I am an expert / at holding on / and I have to / unlearn / my expertise.” Laura's poem includes reflection not only on her current state (“letting go is hard to do”) but also on how that came to be so (“I had to practice it so diligently so it wasn't artificial”) and how mothering him might be different in the future (“I have to unlearn my expertise”). Thus she not only narrates the events but also offers reflection about the events (commenting on them) and takes up new perspectives on those events (looking to future action).

During the summer Laura reported a related shift in her perception of her importance and abilities. In writing about mothering, she validated that role and came to see it is a feature of her professional, capable self, rather than as a distraction from it or as something altogether outside of her professional identity. She also attributed the shift to the community she experienced in the Summer Institute, and to the writing group in particular. Writing groups were formed randomly, including four or five teachers in each group from different grade levels. They received guidelines on responding to writing based on Elbow and Belanoff (1989), including strategies such as pointing to striking passages and “saying back” the central idea of a piece. The teacher sharing the draft was asked to determine what type of response he or she would find most helpful, and group members were asked to adhere

to that request. Laura noted the effects of the group's discourse not only on her writing but also on her overall sense of her abilities. Looking over the contents of the notebook/journal, she noted in her final "journal evaluation":

Three days before beginning the Institute, I wrote a silly little acrostic poem about my lack of writing confidence. Two days into our collective adventure, however, I was given enough a sense of hope about the safety of the larger group—and, in particular—my own writing group, that I began a poem about the fertile environment I had been invited into. (This later became a poem I gave to the members of my group.) Still, my writing continued to express a sense of urgency over not having important enough things to write about, or an interesting enough way to say them.

Gradually, though, with the help of great modeling on the part of many presenters and fellows; and the gentle encouragement of my writing group, I began to realize that life didn't have to get in the way of writing. It could be the stuff of which my writing was made, and when I allowed that to happen, all of a sudden, I became more fluent, more confident, and much more reflective about both my personal life and my professional life.

These changes, becoming "more fluent, more confident, and much more reflective," were at the center of Laura's Summer Institute experience. Laura's changes in confidence were not merely cases of adding confidence to existing notions of herself and her work. She had reframed her notion of the relationship between writing and life: Before, she had an understanding of writing as either totally private, personal journaling or public, impersonal writing. Now she understood the two concepts—personal writing and public

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writing—as integrated, saying that "life . . . could be the stuff of which writing was made." That shift was accompanied by changes in her fluency and confidence as a writer. As the summer progressed, she reported trying new forms (such as poems) and allowing herself greater freedom

in choosing topics, signs of increased ownership over the writing tasks she undertook, the products she would produce, and the purposes for which she would produce them.

At summer's end, Laura had plans to share a collection of writing about motherhood with her sons. Professionally, she reported moving from an understanding of herself as a teacher caught between the competing interests of her students and administrative expectations who was struggling to implement and integrate curricula whose rationales were frequently at odds with one another, to an understanding of herself as a competent professional whose insights could help other teachers:

That summer, I became reminded of how much I thrive on academic conversation (I had talked myself into believing I didn't need that for a number of years).

That summer I got a shot in the arm with regard to my own abilities, and I believe that it was really where I began—in earnest—to see myself as a teacher-leader. I am starting Master's work this week . . . had waited for a while for several reasons. One of them was that I didn't want to pursue it for the sole reason of moving over on the salary scale, but I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with it professionally. I was given more of an impetus at [the Summer Institute]—and during subsequent [Writing Project] experiences [Laura went on to conduct inservice workshops in the academic year after the Institute]—to think that through, and have.

Laura now describes herself as someone who “thrive[s] on academic conversation,” a “teacher-leader.” In the year following the Summer Institute, Laura presented inservice workshops at other schools and decided to pursue a master's degree, a step she had worried she was not academically or intellectually prepared to make. In the second year after Laura completed the Summer Institute, she published an article in *The Voice*, a publication of the National Writing Project; four years after her Summer Institute experience, Laura is now working in a leadership role in her school district, is leading activities of her local NWP site, and has presented about her experiences at the NCTE Annual Convention.

Discussion

Laura mentioned two tensions at the start of the Summer Institute. One had to do with her desire to undertake more creative activities with students while being subsumed under “NCLB-related pressures” to use a more prescriptive strategy. Another source of tension for Laura at the beginning of the summer was her response to the Institute's invitation to write. Laura, like others in the larger study, reported worrying that her writing wouldn't be good enough or that she had nothing worthwhile to say. Hence she said she was concerned that all she could write was “only mom stuff” and worried that writing on a personal topic would not be up to the standards of her writing group—a group of fellow professionals. She wrote in her end-of-summer journal reflection that before the Summer Institute began, she felt herself an impostor: “By the time I entered our room . . . on June 29th, I was convinced you . . . had invited an impostor; had surely made your first big [Writing Project] mistake.”

These emotions, which might have threatened to stop Laura from writing altogether, were relieved through a dual process of sharing and receiving

feedback on writing and eventually giving herself permission to proceed. Regardless of Laura's feelings about the worthiness of her work, its topics, or how much writing she had been able to get done, she was immediately and consistently called on to share her writing, both with a writing group and with the Summer Institute group as a whole. Thus the discourse communities in which Laura participated shaped both the writing she produced and her sense of what that writing could be. In Laura's story, the importance of this participation was evident when she met with her writing group for the first time, with a "mom piece" in hand, feeling nervous and not sure whether it was even appropriate to be working on it. She told them, "I'm not really even sure why I'm showing this to you because I'm struggling with what. . . . I guess I'm struggling with where I should be in terms of what I'm writing. Or what the purpose of my writing should be."

She said their response immediately relieved some of the negative emotions Laura had been having about writing: they encouraged her to continue, "pointing" (Elbow & Belanoff, 1989) to parts of the manuscript they found especially compelling. Thus, after an initial period of discomfort, with continued practice (after all, participation in the Summer Institute requires frequent writing, both on one's own and as a part of the two or three presentations each day) and with the consistent response, encouragement, and acceptance of the writing group, Laura eventually allowed herself permission to write on whatever topics, in whatever forms, that seemed most appropriate—and gave herself permission to proceed with whatever self-examination and learning might follow from the writing. Laura recalled,

Gradually, though, with the help of great modeling on the part of many presenters and fellows and the gentle encouragement of my writing group, I began to realize that life didn't have to get in the way of writing. It could be the stuff of which my writing was made—and when I allowed that to happen, all of a sudden, I became more fluent, more confident, and much more reflective about both my personal life and my professional life.

Laura then went on to write and to engage in self-reflection on topics both personal and professional. According to her self-reports and to my analysis of writing samples Laura shared with me, she wrote about the following topics between the May orientation and the end of the Summer Institute (excluding additional topics not listed here, which appeared in private writing not shared with me):

Daily events

Education and teaching: school climate, family literacy

Feelings

Ideas and values: home, faith

Memories and past experiences: family crises, family milestones

Relationships: marriage, parent/child

The future

While Laura wrote about a range of professional and personal topics and frequently blended the two, she initially reported feelings of guilt and shame around the worthiness of her chosen topics and, perhaps by extension, around her abilities or performance as a writer. For example, when Laura reread her journal at the end of the summer, she described her first entry, written in May before the Summer Institute began, as “dubiously hopeful as to whether I would be able to ever find anything interesting or worth writing about.”

While she routinely generated multiple topics to write about, she reported feeling that those topics wouldn’t be sufficiently interesting to others or that, since they were “personal” topics such as family and personal history, they were somehow not appropriate for the professional setting of the Summer Institute. In an interview in mid-summer, Laura described how her writing kept turning to the subjects of family and mothering, even when she made a conscious and concerted effort to direct her writing elsewhere. Laura clearly felt the need to reflect on the topic of “mom stuff” but felt bad about it, as though it were not a worthy topic; it was “only” mom stuff. As time passed, however, Laura’s feelings changed; after making a list of potential writing topics and noticing that the top two had to do with parenting, she told herself, “You know, I just need to stop fighting this, I just need to *do* this.”

Laura felt called to write about motherhood, and after weeks of worrying, she finally began to focus on that topic in earnest and “just *do* this.” Once Laura gave herself permission to write on the topics that were important to her, the feelings of guilt subsided. She wrote about her role as a mother for the rest of the Summer Institute, both in private journal entries and in pieces that she would revise and share with others. For Laura, a prerequisite for self-examination and eventual learning was overcoming a sense that such self-reflection wasn’t important, that the topics most on her mind were unworthy, and/or that writing was not an appropriate venue for self-reflective work.

Once she had done so, she used the material unearthed during self-examination to reframe some of her perspectives on writing, teaching, and life (for a fuller discussion of reframing, see Whitney, 2008). For instance, she reframed her conception of herself as a writer, reporting:

That summer for the first time, I considered the possibility of calling myself “a writer” (weird; because I’ve known for a long time that I could turn a phrase adequately from time to time . . . but that just meant “I like to write” not “I am a writer.”).

Reframing might occur along more than one dimension simultaneously (personal, professional, writerly), and writing can contribute to growth along each of these dimensions, with one dimension informing another. Laura shifted from describing her mothering role as “only mom stuff” to a central and valued aspect of her identity. By the summer’s end, she reported having taken up a new way of understanding motherhood:

And from then on, the best writing—I don’t know if it’s anything great, it’s just the best of me, the best of what’s inside of me has been about my parenting. So I’ve been thinking, maybe there’s something for that, maybe if for nothing else, to give it to my kids. Some kind of little collection of essays or reflections, or poems that had to do with me being a mom. Me being their mom.

Mothering was something she acknowledged as important, in fact as being “the best of what’s inside me.” Instead of discounting the writing she did about mothering as “only” and struggling with whether to continue it, she envisioned a form of publication for that writing. And she describes it as something to offer that her children might benefit from.

In fact, Laura reported realizing that certain of the roles she inhabits in her life emerged as, to her, the most important: “I realized that there were a couple of different things that I was writing about. One, one, the mom thing. You know, I kept writing about mom things and then there were other teacher things like this, and that’s how this one started.” Naming mothering and teaching explicitly as roles, and as topics that she thought about and reacted to, seems to have enabled her to see the relationships between these roles, things she would once have categorized as separate. Rereading her summer journal, she noted, “My journal has more entries about my life as a mother, than it does about my life as a teacher, or a wife, or a woman or any other role I play. One of the teacher entries is even also a ‘mother’ one!”

Laura undertook a similar reframing of perspective on her role as a teacher. Laura initially described herself as pulled between the conflicting priorities of encouraging and inspiring student enjoyment of writing and helping students write in the structured way expected on standardized tests. Laura noted in her application essay, written in February of the previous year,

Although it sometimes feels stilted and that it flies in the face of my innate desire to make writing creative and true to the author’s voice, I have found

that the use of a planning organizer (an example would be a “4-Square”), and a very specific rubric throughout the process . . . has become the skill I have focused on most, and from which I have seen the most dramatic results.

Laura had initially presented Four Square (a template for writing paragraphs) as an effective strategy, but the tension between these two priorities in teaching writing later surfaced as a problem for Laura; she recounted that she worried about “the struggle to balance the two poles of pursuing the joy of writing . . . and the structure of writing. . . . I have struggled with that for the past four years, not being able to marry the two.”

Laura’s writing, in the form of journal entries, responses to colleagues’ presentations, and notes for the coming school year reflects her changing perspective on this issue over time—from pointing to a highly structured strategy as one of her most effective classroom approaches in her application essay to characterizing that same strategy as “uninspiring and ineffective for my students.” She labeled her prior approaches “more rote-, worksheet-, ‘sage on the stage’ kind of work.” By the end of the Summer Institute, she expressed a revised stance, holding that “teaching is best done with the heart and mind in tandem,” which is manifested in activities such as “cooperative groups, investigative learning, [and] conversation-based stuff.”

By the end of the Summer Institute, she expressed a revised stance, holding that “teaching is best done with the heart and mind in tandem,” which is manifested in activities such as “cooperative groups, investigative learning, [and] conversation-based stuff.”

Laura’s story also highlights the situated nature of writing in the context of a professional community. The members of her group are simultaneously positioned as colleagues, as friends, as writers; her positions relative to them may change over time as she claims membership in and gains expertise in the genres and conventions of the community of professional colleagues, the community of writers. Her writing, like her community memberships, is never neatly divided into personal or professional; instead, for example, an outcome of her writing and sharing a piece on a (personal) topic such as mothering may promote competent participation in the (personal and professional) community of “writers” and claim authority as a (professional) teacher who will subsequently write a (professional) article—an article that includes, I should add, several passages of (personal) narrative about her feelings and her relationships with students. While these various writing activities, communities, and audiences can be separated and categorized as personal/professional, and it is at times useful to do so, for Laura they are

lived as a complex but unified curve of development rather than as separate strands. And a picture of Laura's professional development in the Summer Institute that missed one strand would (by focusing, for instance, only on her memoir writing or only on her drafts of a professional article) thus miss an overall picture of her growth.

Implications

NWP sites should ask teachers to engage in professional writing, but not exclusively, so that teachers' opportunities to integrate personal and professional concerns are maximized. The talk around the writing, and not simply the content or form of the writing itself, contributed to Laura's enlarged and developing sense of herself as a writer, a mother, and a professional.

From the first communication from the NWP site in which "professional writing" was mentioned, Laura worried about how she would fulfill that requirement and questioned how each piece of her writing would advance the professional purposes of the Institute. The site director's letter designated one particular piece of writing as "professional" and contributed to Laura's sense that the rest of the writing she was engaging in must not be professional at all; meanwhile, knowing that the NWP was a professional development network, she was surprised when so much of the attention in thought in writing went to her life as a mother rather than to her work in the classroom. Yet, Laura experienced growth in both domains—domains she experienced as inextricably linked parts of a single life—and that growth seemed to occur not as a result of writing in one form or another but as a result of the ways she and her writing group colleagues took up that writing. Teachers find diverse points of entry through writing on varied topics in varied forms. Different forms of writing and different topics addressed using those forms offer different points of entry for different teachers. Through her work on family and mothering, Laura entered a space where she could explore issues of authority and role—issues that cut across the domains of family and workplace. Laura worried that her writing, the content of that writing, and her learning in the Summer Institute would not fit appropriately into the dichotomous categories of "personal" and "professional" writing that she had brought with her to the Summer Institute. The NWP site reinforced that thought with its explicit invitation to write a "professional piece," yet her peers mediated that dichotomy for her. Together they determined the legitimacy of various pieces of writing and the purposes that a piece of writing could serve vis-à-vis professional development. Laura and her group reframed her sense of self as a writer, a teacher, and a mother to reveal how

these selves are not parallel or divergent trajectories, not discrete identities, but rather comprise her whole meaning.

Rather than working to establish the relative importance of personal and professional writing, site directors (and those providing inservice in almost any setting where writing is appropriate) would do better to continue inviting teachers to try both, then devote attention to helping teachers and their writing groups explore the purposes each might serve and the connections between them. Teachers like Laura might benefit from explicit discussion about the tensions between personal writing and the multiple purposes to which various pieces of writing might be put, along with open discussion about the impossibility of separating personal and professional concerns in any one piece of writing (or any one moment of a teacher's experience). In other words, it is acceptable that teachers work through tensions between personal and professional forms and topics for writing.

Further research is needed to clarify the relationship between writing and professional development in the summer institutes in general; the original study from which Laura's story was drawn (Whitney, 2006) takes one small step in that direction. How does it affect students that Laura and other teachers are more confident in their abilities and sees themselves more as contributors to the field? How will this change affect their career trajectory? Long-term study could help to clarify these outcomes of the teachers' writing experiences.

Perhaps most fundamentally, to understand the importance of writing in professional development (and, more practically, to make informed decisions about the writing opportunities offered to teachers in the summer institute and in other professional development settings), we must look not to the outcomes of any one kind of writing activity but value should be placed on *relationships* between personal writing, professional writing, and professional growth. Laura's example demonstrates how simultaneous writing and reflection on personal and professional concerns can result in powerful learning experiences for the writer that stretch into both personal and professional domains. Alsup (2006) demonstrates how the working out of tensions between professional and personal subjectivities is central to becoming a teacher, and she notes the importance of interrogating one's narratives about family and friends along with educational memories, university education, and ideologies; in her study, students who were most successful at becoming teachers were those who were most successful in reflecting on and working out the complex relationships between those. A sharp delineation between women's roles in the family and in the workplace can force them into a false dichotomy of experience and make such reflection more difficult. Laura did

not automatically separate her writing and her learning into bins labeled “personal” and professional”; in fact, a key source of tension for her was a sense that perhaps she *should* be doing so, born in part of a notion that to be a mother and to be a teacher were two separate ways of being. When Laura dismissed this concern, her most powerful writing and learning experiences of the summer became possible.

Questions persist about why classroom teachers have not been more active participants in the published discourse of the field. The voices of classroom practitioners are muffled by the time and workload factors that constitute real practical obstacles to sustained intellectual engagement and writing on the part of teachers and by university-driven models of scholarship that dominate outlets for professional publication. Other scholars (e.g., Check, 1988, 2002, 2004; Fecho, 2005) have rightly pointed out that one factor in this dynamic has been the tension between the teachers’ desire to use narrative, and particularly first-person narrative, to capture classroom experience and, also, a model of academic prose as “objective” and decidedly third person. In addition, however, it is not only the modes in which teachers might *present* their work in a piece of writing that pose difficulty but also the modes in which they have typically been encouraged to *inquire* into that work. If, as Laura’s story and others like it suggest, professional growth and insight are fostered in part by writing not overtly tied to professional concerns, then when teachers are not encouraged to experiment with that kind of writing, a potential site for inquiry and the accompanying professional development may be lost. In other words, a barrier to teachers who would write professionally is not only the challenge of putting insights into seemingly inaccessible academic prose but also the potential inaccessibility of those insights themselves when they are pursued solely through academic prose. For teachers to learn through writing, they need opportunities to engage in the full range of writing.

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Correction: In the January 2009 issue, on p. 185 of Nicholas Paley's "Book Walk" essay, item 1 under "Tips for Writing" should read "Choose a pain."