‘No one knows teaching like teachers,’ or so teachers say.

Insider knowledge of a field of practice is true in all occupational groups, but teachers seem to need to defend the power of their insider-knowledge more than most. Unlike other occupations, teachers contend with the public’s general sense that they know what teaching is about; after all, we’ve been students for years, experiencing that ‘long apprenticeship of observation’ that Dan Lortie wrote about in *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (1975). But as any student teacher will readily admit, actually being a teacher makes vivid how distant that apprenticeship of observation is from the real thing and how little it tells us about the interior life of teaching.

Life in classrooms is deeply personal and intensely emotional, with the rhythmic ups and downs of real humans negotiating the dimensions of a productive community over time. Teachers craft a way to ‘be’ in the classroom, a persona that is part personal, part professional, and fully attentive to the small moves and minute details that create environments for learning. That sustained attention and emotional management make for an exhausting effort, but without them, no classroom becomes functional. The human element of the interior life of classrooms is of a different order than the organization of standards and topics to be covered or outputs to be produced or test scores to be achieved. Yet it is foundational to all of them.

Every teacher knows this to be true.

Perhaps this is why teachers value the advice and experience of other teachers, almost beyond anything else. In a recent poll from NewSchools and Gallup, 81% of teachers reported trusting the advice of other teachers as compared to principals (28%), district staff (34%), or evidence-based
reports (18%). So, when teachers self-organize and sustain their own learning, the rest of us should trust their decisions and designs.

Taking teachers’ decisions and designs seriously is also the narrative of the National Writing Project, a 50-year story that begins at the University of California in Berkeley, when a group of teachers were invited to learn together with an intent to improve the teaching of writing. By following their own learning instincts, they created the model for the Bay Area Writing Project and, eventually, the National Writing Project network of local sites (Gray, 2005). With no particular expectation that there would be a 50-year runway in front of them, they worked to create recipes for learning environments that were most impactful for them as teachers.

Over the years, the recipes have been refined and extended with a mix of ingredients that have now become commonplace for teacher learning: demonstrations of practice and close study of curriculum enacted in critical friendship; collegial, open-ended study of the literature on writing and teaching; inquiry and collective experimentation into promising approaches. They committed themselves to investigating the practice of writing itself, to learn about teaching writing by doing the discipline of writing in a reflective community—all while writing together and sharing writing as writers do. The practice of writing together in community likely takes most of the credit for the energy and loyalty to the National Writing Project that teachers maintain to this day. The human, and humane, practice of writing together and learning about the self and others in community is a powerful way to understand the interior life of teaching made visible through the written word. Writing together, as learned from 1974 to 2023, creates bonds that go beyond superficial professional development and routine coaching support.

But then, of course, came COVID-19 and the extreme disruptions to teaching and learning in schools. We could ask, ‘What happened to teacher-led communities as classroom environments were upended? Were the bonds forged in more normal times of use during the years of school closings, mask-wars, and social strife that marked the COVID-19 pandemic? How did National Writing teachers and leaders choose to respond to the challenges they face?’

During the pandemic, everything changed, and it didn’t change in the same way in all places and for all teachers. Teachers, who are also parents and managers of households and families, experienced disruption in every facet of their lives. And yet, they continued to show up as essential workers did, whether in online teaching environments or carefully opened schools. They rose to the occasion. They carried the work forward. For those in the National Writing Project network, they wrote.

No one knows pandemic teaching like teachers.
The 11 critical reflections featured in these two issues demonstrate the importance of teacher leadership for humane and human-centered teacher learning and support. The National Writing Project is a professional learning community that prizes both seeing and being seen and knowing and being known fully as human as well as a teacher. The same recipe that helped found the National Writing Project and so many subsequent teacher networks since, holds and can address new challenges and new experiences for those in the classroom today. It is a tradition – a National Writing Project tradition – that is approaching its 50th year. Augmented by technology, and informed by new research and pedagogical understandings, the connections between and among teachers in support of each other through COVID-19 are part of the remarkable achievements of the profession.

As we go forward into the future, the experience of COVID-19 will grow fuzzy in memory and the visceral experience of pandemic teaching is likely to fade. So, it is essential to mark how teacher communities organized themselves to get through those challenging years and to recognize the voluntary leadership of teachers on the ground to support themselves, their colleagues, and their communities.

The reflections across these two issues provide windows into the achievement of intentional community that is both humane and forward-looking, asking the question, ‘How can we design educational systems that recognize human connection as the foundation of all the work we do together in schools?’ These articles exemplify connections made through National Writing Project traditions, the importance of writing communities, and the ever-growing faith that young people deserve teachers who write and writers who teach.

References