Introduction to the Special Issue on The National Writing Project at work: Disruption, joy, and rejuvenation in a time of Covid-19

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\textit{in through the nose}
\textit{out through the mouth}
\textsuperscript{~}Jason Reynolds (2022), \textit{Ain’t Burned All the Bright}

\textit{Ain’t Burned All the Bright}, written by Jason Reynolds and illustrated by Jason Griffin, is the poetic account of a young man’s homestay during 2020, when a global pandemic and racial strife prompted many of us to rethink schools, families, friendships, and societal purpose across the United States. As governments around the world took necessary precautions to limit the spread of Covid-19 and announced the shutdown of in person learning in March 2020, more than 1.5 billion students in over 190 countries remained home to receive instruction online, if at all (UNESCO, 2020). In the United States, within the span of just three weeks, every public-school building closed and 50 million students transitioned to learning from home (Levinson & Markovits, 2022).

Through this time, the focus of many teachers, researchers, and policymakers’ minds has been on understanding the impact of Covid-19 on children’s learning, and on what can be done to remedy the long-term consequences of interrupted and altered schooling. Public education in the United States has also faced fallout from the pandemic on the teaching force with teacher attrition and shortages rising (Goldhaber & Theobald, 2022). While the damaging impact of the pandemic demands significant attention and resources, there are also bright lights that shine...
in terms of teaching practice, innovation, collaboration, and learning. As Elyse Eidman-Aahdal, Executive Director of the National Writing Project (NWP), shared in a talk during the 2022 National Council for Teachers of English Annual Meeting, 'Teachers in the National Writing Project rolled up their sleeves and showed up each and every day to teach writing in this country, even when many did or could not.'

This special double issue of *Writing & Pedagogy* includes eleven articles representing the work of NWP sites from across regions of the United States including Alabama, Arizona, California, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Michigan, New York, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and South Carolina. As the nation’s largest network of teacher-leaders, kindergarten to graduate school and across the curriculum, NWP works together through local Writing Project sites to improve the teaching of writing and learning in schools and communities via research, professional development, and literacy-driven partnerships (Baker & Early, 2019). NWP creates teacher leaders with the capacity to engage in research-based writing practices locally, nationally, and globally, such as the ones detailed in this special issue.

Our goal is to provide a window into the way teachers, researchers, and leaders from the National Writing Project innovated and evolved research and the teaching of writing to meet the needs of student, families, and communities in school settings and beyond during the Covid-19 pandemic. The National Writing Project is made up of 175 local Writing Project sites that have initiated research-practice partnerships since its founding as a single site in 1974 in Berkeley, California (Gray, 2000). As the National Writing Project moves toward its 50th anniversary, sites continue to uphold principles to improve the teaching and learning of writing and to share research and best practices with colleagues around the world:

- Writing can and should be taught, not just assigned, in every discipline and at every level of schooling.
- Teachers of writing must write.
- Effective professional development programs provide frequent opportunities for teachers to collectively and systematically examine research and practice.
- Teachers at every level ... are the agents of reform; universities and schools are ideal partners for investing together in their reform.
- Although there is no single right approach to teaching writing, some practices are better than others, and a research-informed community of practice is in the best position to design and develop a comprehensive writing program (McDonald et al., 2004).
Although the National Writing Project reaches across geographic boundaries and strengthens the connections, collaborations, and possibilities of the teaching profession, primarily in the U.S. (Lieberman & Wood, 2003), we feel our work can benefit writing researchers and educators globally. Within its mission, NWP supports and upholds writing teachers to take on the everyday problems of classroom instruction (Aadahl, 2019; Whitney & Friedrich, 2013) and to make wise, transformative decisions for schools, districts, and professional organizations (Whitney, 2008). This community work builds on local funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005) and ways of making meaning in our school communities (Fox, 2018; McDonald et al., 2004). The goal always is to implement research-based practices to improve the teaching of writing at all levels (Booth-Olson et al., 2020; Heenan, 2017), including diverse, inclusive, and multilingual settings (Chandler-Olcott, 2019; Flores et al., 2023).

When Jessica, the Director of the Central Arizona Writing Project, decided to undertake a special issue focused on NWP work during the time of Covid-19 and beyond, she contacted Bryan, Director of the Connecticut Writing Project-Fairfield. Together we shared an invitation with directors and teacher leaders across 175 sites to come write with us. We pitched a themed issue: Writing Practices That Work: Disruption, Joy, and Rejuvenation in a Time of Covid-19 and asked for articles that critically reflect on choices made during the pandemic’s shut-down months. We asked contributors for ‘Reflections on Practice’ with ‘Research Matters’ on their minds. In other words, we wanted authors to name research-based adaptations made during the pandemic in support of teachers-leaders, young people, families, and schools.

As guest editors to Writing & Pedagogy, we desired to name why a network like the National Writing Project is important to sustain and maintain effective writing pedagogy in K-12 schools, to support individuals who build communities and initiate new learning in U.S. classrooms, and more importantly, to relieve educational burdens that arrived during complicated and trying times. The articles that appear across the two issues reflect on the writing that occurred within and beyond numerous settings, locations, and regions. They highlight National Writing Project practices we feel worthy of adoption, replication, and adaptation for writers, schools, and instruction around the world. We began to recognize our contributors were not only focused on teaching in online and digital spaces (Turner & Hicks, 2022) during 2020, they also were collaborating and making a commitment to anti-racist practices (Kendi, 2016, 2019), especially with writing instruction and workshops (Chavez, 2021). For these reasons, the articles were divided into two issues.
The first issue shares critical reflections from NWP teacher-leaders on how their sites adapted to online spaces during the Covid-19 pandemic to maintain mentorship of pre-service and first-year teachers, as well as to provide care across the network. Tom Meyer and Mary Sawyer reflect on the use of ‘The Teaching Writing Framework’ that was developed over a 3-year period to mentor and support pre-service teachers working within online youth programs. Similarly, Michelle Glerum details the way she created online spaces for beginning teachers who found their first-year teaching experiences occurring without a traditional classroom, to gather as teacher-writers with a mission to problem solve and to heal. The authors model how they adopted National Writing Project principles to initiate early-career and fledgling teachers to use writing to sustain oneself within a lifelong profession.

Also in the first issue, contributors highlight programs and practices designed to bring a network of writing educators together across state lines. Kell Sassi, Richard Louth, and Susan Martens reflect on virtual writing marathons hosted as part of Write Across America, a national campaign where educators were given opportunities to transcend the homestay work environment to virtually visit historical locations across the United States. Similarly, Sarah J. Donovan and Stefani Boutelie detail spaces they created to promote Verse Love, an online community for poets to inquire, to write, to find joy, and to gain relief. Concomitantly, Bryan Ripley Crandall and Tanya Baker, Director of National Programs, reflect on NWP’s launch of The Write Time, a podcast that began during the pandemic to bring teachers of writing and authors of children’s and young adult books together as a resource across the network.

In the second issue, critical reflections were grouped that made deliberate investment toward teaching agentive, anti-racist writing practices because of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, social unrest in the United States, and protests occurring during the Covid-19 lockdown. Each highlights adaptations made in 2020 as sites worked to problem-solve, react, and move forward with a commitment to writing instruction. Amber Curlee writes of empathy, understanding, and alliance taken in support of a family literacy program, while Ginette Rossi highlights choices made to maintain youth-driven inquiry projects with a mission for social justice and equity. The authors highlight ways social unrest transcended Covid-19 and impacted the young people and families they served.

Similarly, articles in this issue demonstrate the ways that critical friendships led to enhancing professional development during a global pandemic with an intention to address U.S. racial history, cultural representation, and inclusive writing practices. Susan Densmore James and Bryan Ripley Crandall reflect on the digital tools that helped support their critical
friendship to build diverse, inclusive writing opportunities for youth, pre-
and inservice educators, and colleagues, all while making a commitment
to diversity, equity, and inclusivity. Richard Novack writes about how he
and Park Ranger Kristin Lessard helped others to read landscapes and
write nature through professional development with Weir Farm National
Historical Park by bringing forward difficult questions and criticality.
Similarly, Ellen Shelton and Rebecca Kaminski offer critical reflection of
a cross-site self-examination to promote equity and an antiracist ecology
in their writing spaces, to highlight the challenges, difficulties, and tri-
umphs they faced. In addition, Vanessa Vega, Tonya Perry, Naomi Pryor,
and Sonjanika Henderson-Green share how the Red Mountain Writing
Project utilized Critical Race Theory and historical responsive literacy to
offer online locations to write and heal together.

The two NWP issues of Writing & Pedagogy bring forward National
Writing Project traditions that promote research-based writing practices
and a commitment to teacher-leaders who are building writing communi-
ties in their own contexts. Across both, in fact, articles reflect on tremen-
dous outcomes achieved because of integrating National Writing Project
beliefs while building online, cross-region, and sometimes multi-state
opportunities in support of schools and teachers. Together, the articles
helped us to see:

- Writing together as critical friends and colleagues is a way to heal
  and cope with an ever-changing landscape of schooling in a digital
  age, especially as teachers are processing a time of social and
  political unrest.
- Human-centered writing instruction recognizes that the local is
  also global, and the global is also local (educators around the world
  are in this work together).
- New generations of teachers and students still require mentoring
  and guidance, especially as writing instruction moves into digital
  spaces.
- Writing communities that center writers as individuals belonging
  to several communities are better positioned to support the needs
  of all writers.
- In the U.S., there’s an urgent need to reevaluate long held beliefs
  about writing instruction, especially in relation to changing
demographics in K-12 schools. We need to ask whether traditional
writing instruction has benefited or hindered all youth in our care,
especially those most marginalized by our institutional traditions.

Although challenged by Covid-19, the National Writing Project network
of scholars and teacher leaders found sanctuary and recovery with one
another and through the work of promoting writing in school. We used writing as a tool for communication, connection, agency, and healing. As Jason Reynolds wrote, ‘in through the nose, out through the mouth.’ Together, as a network, we reminded one another to breathe. We found the oxygen we needed from the work we are fortunate to do.

References


