

Insights Brief

Preparing Teacher Leaders to Lead Professional Learning Insights from the National Writing Project

Teacher leaders can play a valuable role in supporting the professional learning of their colleagues. They can draw on their own teaching experiences to coach teachers, and they are well-positioned as school leaders to improve the instruction of their colleagues. However, there are a few potential challenges with teacher leaders facilitating professional learning. They may not be familiar with the instructional strategies their colleagues are learning, or they may lack the skills needed to support other teachers in learning how to apply them. This brief offers insights to help address these challenges based on the National Writing Project's experience preparing teachers to lead one of its professional development programs. The insights are relevant for preparing teacher leaders to facilitate professional learning in all areas of instruction.

BACKGROUND

The National Writing Project's College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP) supports teachers in developing students' ability to write arguments based on evidence from non-fiction texts.ⁱ Designed for grades 4 through 12, the program includes ongoing professional development, a set of instructional resources for use in classrooms, and formative assessments for students.ⁱⁱ

The professional development component of C3WP is led by teacher leaders (called "teacher consultants") who complete a year-long institute that prepares them to use the program's tools and approaches in their own classrooms (called the "Advanced Institute"). The teacher leaders attend a summer launch event, typically lasting three days, and then meet throughout the school year while integrating or adapting the new teaching methods into their classroom.

An overarching goal of the Advanced Institute is to build teacher leaders' understanding of the intent of the instructional program's methods, not just how to replicate them. In addition, by creating opportunities for teacher leaders to adapt these methods for their own classrooms, the institute prepares them to support their colleagues in tailoring C3WP's instructional approaches for different contexts.

About this series

The U.S. Department of Education's Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grants fund evidence-based programs that prepare and develop effective educators. As SEED grantees implement, adapt, and grow their programs, they gain valuable insights that can inform the work of districts, states, and organizations working to improve educator effectiveness. This series of briefs is designed to share these insights with the broader field. Each brief describes a grantee's perspective on the lessons learned from its implementation experiences. The briefs are part of a broader project for the U.S. Department of Education to disseminate lessons learned from SEED grants. Mathematica Policy Research is leading the project in partnership with AEM and Knowledge Design Partners. This brief was prepared based on input from the National Writing Project.

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INSIGHTS ON PREPARING TEACHER LEADERS TO LEAD PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The following insights from the National Writing Project's C3WP address key questions about preparing teacher leaders to support their colleagues in learning new instructional approaches.

What are key steps for preparing teacher leaders to support their colleagues in using a particular instructional program or approach?

Although districts often identify teacher leaders based on their strong performance, teacher leaders may not have experience using the specific instructional approach being taught to teachers. As an example, the National Writing Project selects teacher leaders who have a strong background in teaching writing, but the teacher leaders typically do not have experience with C3WP's approach to teaching argument writing. The National Writing Project uses the following strategies to build teacher leaders' understanding of the program's instructional approaches and ability to support their colleagues in adopting them:

- ❖ **Give teacher leaders opportunities to experience the instructional content that is being taught to students.** When teacher leaders experience the content from the perspective of a student, it can help them better understand the challenges posed by learning the new skills. This in turn makes them better able to support students through the learning process. The National Writing Project provides many opportunities for teacher leaders to practice the writing techniques that students are taught through the C3WP program. For example, similar to students, teacher leaders practice the skill of annotating what they read, by making note of strong evidence, new information, and opinions. After practicing such techniques, they are prompted to reflect on the experience.
- ❖ **Have teacher leaders use the new instructional approach in their classrooms before helping colleagues learn the approach.** Teacher leaders spend a full school year implementing C3WP with their own students before supporting other teachers in using the program. This has several benefits. First, it allows the teacher leaders to see how students respond to the instruction. As a result, they can better help their

colleagues anticipate and address the struggles that students experience when learning specific skills, such as mapping the relationships between the information in different sources. Second, teacher leaders experience the challenge of integrating the instructional approach into their teaching and using the strategies in their classroom. As an example, implementing the C3WP program in the classroom often requires letting go of long-held ideas about how to teach writing. By experiencing this process themselves, teacher leaders are more prepared to support their colleagues in managing this change process. Third, the teacher leaders build a repertoire of lessons learned and advice that they can offer colleagues when helping them learn to implement the program.

What are key strategies for building teacher leaders' capacity to help colleagues apply and adapt an instructional approach in different classroom settings?

The National Writing Project emphasizes the importance of "integrity" over "fidelity" in implementation. This means focusing on whether teachers' understand how to use the instructional strategies to achieve specific instructional goals, rather than focusing on whether teachers implement particular techniques exactly as taught in the trainings.

The need for flexibility is driven in part by the program's structure: teachers in C3WP learn in cohorts of 12 to 15 educators from different schools, often with different curricula, requirements, resources, and student needs. Teachers who can adapt the program's tools and instructional approach for their own contexts are able to expand beyond the specific instructional activities covered through the program.

To support this flexible implementation, the National Writing Project uses the following strategies in preparing teacher leaders:

- ❖ **Build a deep understanding of and appreciation for the goals of the instructional approach.** Teacher leaders develop teachers' understanding of the type of writing valued by the program and its role in building students' reasoning abilities. By helping teachers gain a

deep understanding of these concepts—teacher leaders build teachers’ capacity to adapt the program for different contexts while still supporting its overall objectives. To prepare teacher leaders for this role, the first two days of the Advanced Institute’s 3-day summer program is primarily devoted to understanding a particular form of argument writing. In this view, argument writing is less about making points and counterpoints, and more about effectively building a well-grounded understanding of an issue. At the outset of the Advanced Institute, teacher leaders are exposed to these ideas through books, they study examples of this kind of sophisticated argument writing, and they practice it themselves. This strengthens their ability to support teachers’ in understanding these concepts and applying them in their instruction.

- ❖ **Build an understanding of how instructional resources are designed to support teachers’ learning.** When teachers implement C3WP, they choose from among a series of instructional units that last four-to-six days. During the C3WP program, teachers implement four of these instructional units with students while receiving support from a teacher leader.

To prepare teacher leaders for supporting teachers’ use of these resources, they are trained on the design principles that guide the C3WP resources. (As an example, one principle states, “Provide text sets that represent multiple perspectives on a topic, beyond pro and con.”) When teacher leaders are introduced to the C3WP resources during the Advanced Institute, they learn how the resources reflect the program’s design principles. They also annotate each resource with notes about how it could be used in classrooms and potential areas of confusion for teachers using the resource with students. This close study of the program’s resources and their design allows teacher leaders to support their peers in adapting the resources for different situations while remaining true to their intent.

- ❖ **Create opportunities for teacher leaders from different schools to discuss how they used the instructional strategies.** Teacher leaders complete the Advanced Institute in cohorts of 12-15 individuals. Following the summer session, institute participants meet with their cohorts monthly during the school year through online or in-person meetings as they implement the C3WP program in their own classrooms. Each

meeting includes the collaborative examination of student writing and often includes a “Lesson Study” in which teacher leaders use the same resource synchronously and discuss how students responded in their classrooms.

The ongoing collaborative structure of the Advanced Institute affords participants the opportunity to learn how C3WP is implemented in a variety of classrooms. Leaders of the institute also say that by “struggling together” as they implement the program, teacher leaders feel validated as they take on the difficult task of making significant changes to their practice.

Borrowing ideas from the book *Pose, Wobble, Flow*, about adopting new teaching strategies in literacy, the institute emphasizes that all teachers “wobble” when they first learn new practices.ⁱⁱⁱ While providing teacher leaders with a supportive community as they learn to apply C3WP in their own classrooms, the convenings help participants understand what that “wobble” looks like for different teachers in different contexts.

About this Brief

This brief was developed by Jeff Archer and Jeffrey Max, in collaboration with the following leaders of the National Writing Project: Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, NWP’s executive director; Tom Fox, the organization’s director of site development; and Robin Atwood, director of the South Mississippi Writing Project.

Questions about NWP’s College, Career, and Community Writers Program may be addressed to Tom Fox at tfox@nwp.org.

C3WP resources—including background readings, lesson plans and formative assessments—are available for free download at:

<https://sites.google.com/nwp.org/c3wp/>.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Studies of C3WP (previously called the College Ready Writers Program) have shown positive effects on student learning. For example, a two-year random assignment study showed that students taught by teachers in the program demonstrated greater reasoning proficiency and use of evidence in their writing than comparison group students. See Gallagher, Alix, Katrina Woodworth, and Nicole Arshan. “Research Brief: Impact of the National Writing Project’s College-Ready Writers Program on Teachers and Students.” Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2015.

More qualitative examinations of C3WP by Inverness Research may be found at: <https://inverness-research.org/2017/12/27/portfolio-c3wp/>

ⁱⁱ For a comprehensive overview of C3WP, see Friedrich, Linda, Rachel Bear, and Tom Fox. “For the Sake of Argument: An Approach to Teaching Evidence-Based Writing,” *American Educator*, vol. 42, no. 1, Spring 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ See *Pose, Wobble, Flow*, by Antero Garcia and Cindy O’Donnell-Allen. Teachers College Press. 2015.