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Exploring writing institutes for teachers in South Africa

Abstract

This paper describes an exploratory study based on anecdotal evidence, investigating the need for and feasibility of establishing a formal Writing Institute Program in South Africa. These institutes are modeled on the National Writing Project (NWP) Invitational Summer Institutes, held at 200 sites in the United States (US), Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico during the June-August summer break. Several thousand teachers in the US participate each year in these invitational summer institutes, which are based on the NWP's model of teachers teaching teachers. The US Embassy's Regional English Language Office in South Africa collaborated with directors of writing projects in the United States, and South Africans were

invited to attend summer institutes to explore the possibilities of duplicating the model in South Africa. Since 2008, institutes have been held in South Africa in Port Elizabeth, Cape Town, Limpopo, Pretoria and Durban. This paper is a report on the observed impact of the institutes at these sites, lessons learned about teacher training centres as viable homes for these sites and suggestions for future writing institutes in South Africa. Evidence is presented in the form of vignettes, which explore perceptions on the positive impact of writing institutes in South Africa.

Keywords: Writing institutes; National Writing Project; In-service teacher training.

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1. Introduction

In South Africa, teachers and learners come from diverse multilingual backgrounds. Despite the fact that English was perceived to be one of the languages of power during Apartheid South Africa, indigenous African languages remained prominent in social and cultural domains of the society (Sailors, Makalela, & Hoffman, 2010:9). Consequently, English is the mother tongue of only 9.6% of South Africans (South African Census, 2011), yet it is the dominant language of teaching and learning in almost 80% of classrooms in South Africa (Department of Basic Education, 2010). Learners are taught in a language other than their home language and teachers are not always adequately prepared to teach through the medium of English (Evans & Cleghorn, 2010:147; Heugh, 2009:97; Uys 2006:21). English language proficiency of the teacher is essential in order for learners to achieve academic success in a context where English is the dominant language of learning and teaching (De Wet, 2002:122; Hugo & Nieman, 2010:60; Uys,2006:8). Short (2002:18) emphasizes the importance of learners being taught by teachers who are competent to use the four language skills effectively, as these learners have a better chance to succeed academically.

Writing institutes for teachers give in-service teachers an opportunity to improve their English language proficiency by situating them as writers and readers, giving them the opportunities to practise and improve upon their English language skills. A writing institute is an organized event where teachers meet and activities that support the writing skills of teachers, and strategies to teach writing to learners, are offered. As teachers grapple with their own writing, they learn how to become better teachers of writing to their learners. Naidoo (2001) alludes to the importance of creating writing opportunities for teachers to improve their own writing proficiency, which will positively impact on the writing proficiency of their learners.

This study was an exploratory effort to determine whether participation in writing institutes is an identified and recognized need for South African teachers and if their establishment as a formal program is feasible in the South African education environment. Previous research has shown that writing instruction of learners is often neglected due to insufficient direct teaching and modelling by the teachers (Fischer, 2002).

The Writing Institutes in South Africa are modelled on the National Writing Project (NWP) Writing Institutes, which are held at 200 sites in the United States (US) during the May-August summer break. Several thousand teachers participate each year in invitational summer institutes, which are based on the NWP's model of teachers teaching teachers. The Regional English Language Officer (RELO) at the US Embassy in Pretoria, South Africa collaborated with directors of writing institutes in the United States and South Africans were invited to attend institutes to explore the possibilities of duplicating the model in South Africa. Since 2008, institutes have been held in South Africa in Port Elizabeth, Cape Town, Limpopo, Pretoria and Durban. This paper reports on the institutes at these sites, lessons learned and suggestions for future writing

institutes in South Africa. This is done in the form of vignettes, which explore anecdotal evidence and perceptions on the success of the writing institutes.

The researchers explore the possible impact of writing institutes on teaching and learning in a South African context of L2 language instruction. This will answer the question as to whether participation in these institutes is an identified and recognized need for South African teachers and if their establishment as a formal program is feasible in the South African education environment.

2. Background of the National Writing Project

The National Writing Project (NWP) is a professional development network in the United States that serves teachers of writing at all grade levels, early childhood through university and across the curriculum. The NWP provides professional development, develops resources and generates research to improve the teaching of writing and learning in schools and in communities. The NWP's mission is to focus the knowledge, expertise and leadership of its nation's educators on sustained efforts to improve writing and learning for all learners. A core belief of the NWP is that every learner has the right to have access to high-quality educational experiences. One of the goals of the NWP is to develop teachers as readers, writers, researchers, and teacher leaders and to help them to stay current with the research on teaching writing (National Writing Project, 2015).

NWP sites share a national programme model, adhering to a set of shared principles and practices for teachers' professional development, and offering programmes that are common across the network. In addition to developing a leadership cadre of local teachers (called teacher consultants) through invitational summer institutes, NWP sites design and deliver customized in-service programmes for local schools, districts, and higher education institutions, and they provide a diverse array of continuing education and research opportunities for teachers at all levels. The National Writing Project has served over 2 million teachers and administrators since its inception in 1974 in the Graduate School of Education, at the University of California, Berkeley (National Writing Project, 2015). It was established in partnership with school districts in the Bay Schools area as a university-based professional development programme for teachers (National Writing Project, 2015). NWP sites share a national programme model that includes *Invitational Summer Institutes* and *In-service programmes*. Local sites host 20 to 25 teachers (by invitation only) to spend 4 to 5 weeks in intensive writing institutes where teachers write and read current research on the teaching of writing, and share best practices of writing instruction. After the summer institute, teacher consultants (TCs) form professional learning communities where they continue to grow and support each other as writers, researchers and leaders. TCs develop and deliver customized in-service programmes to local schools and institutions (National Writing Project, 2015).

The core principles of the NWP model are that teachers at every level are the agents of change. Writing can and should be taught; knowledge about the teaching of writing comes from many sources: thus effective professional development programmes provide ongoing opportunities for teachers to research and practise the teaching of writing. In addition, the NWP believes there is no single way to teach writing. However, some practices are more effective than others and a reflective and informed community of practice is in the best position to design and develop comprehensive writing programmes. Furthermore, teachers who are well informed and effective in their practice can be effective teachers of other teachers as well as partners in educational research, development, and implementation. Teacher leaders are the best resource for educational reform (Lieberman, 2007).

2.1 Research on the effectiveness of the NWP

National research studies in the United States (USA) have confirmed significant gains in writing performance among students of teachers who have participated in NWP programmes (Lieberman, 2007). The NWP is the only federally funded programme in the United States (US) that focuses on the teaching of writing. The US Department of Education, foundations, corporations, universities, and K-12 schools provide support for the NWP (National Writing Project, 2015). The National Writing Project focuses the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of our nation's educators on sustained efforts to improve writing and learning for all learners.

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The latest research results published by the National Writing Project (2015) demonstrate that professional development programmes designed and delivered by NWP sites have a positive effect on the writing achievement of students across grade levels, schools, and contexts. In 16 studies conducted in seven states, 103 of 112 comparisons show positive results in writing achievement, favouring students in classrooms of NWP participants (National Writing Project, 2015).

2.2 How the NWP is funded

The National Writing Project contracts institutions of higher education and non-profit education providers to operate small (\$100,000 or less) teacher training programmes. Federal funds support 50 percent of the costs of these programmes and recipients must contribute an equal amount. A National Advisory Board regularly provides advice and support and reviews the Project's programmes and activities.

2.3 Why Writing Institutes in South Africa?

The English language proficiency of teachers is a diverse problem, and this problem is further complicated because the focus in South Africa is currently on 'language across the curriculum' (Uys, Van der Walt, Van den Berg & Botha, 2007), which implies that every

teacher should also be a language teacher. Teachers are required to ensure that students become proficient in basic language skills in every discipline. The Writing Institutes in South Africa address the language issues experienced by teachers and learners in schools in South Africa. The Writing Institutes give in-service teachers an opportunity to improve their English language proficiency in a safe space, where they share ideas on teaching, discuss writing in their own disciplines and are given the opportunity to practise what they preach by actively engaging in writing themselves. Writing Institutes foster a love for writing, which teachers can take back to their classrooms. Writing becomes a way of expression and a vehicle to communication. Writing Institutes create teachers with 'shape-shifting portfolios' who can adapt to different contexts (McCabe, 2011).

Feiman-Nemser (2001) discusses the importance of developing in-service teachers through collaborative in-service programmes. Such programmes increase the teaching repertoire of teachers and create professional development opportunities. The Writing Institutes give teachers this type of professional development. In Writing Institutes, teachers are given a platform to engage in critical discussions on challenges experienced in the classroom and develop their own writing skills in a safe environment. The collegiality and trust which develop through these shared writing opportunities give teachers a stronger sense of self, and build communities of practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001:1043).

The NWP maintains active relationships with associated sites that operate on the NWP model in international locations. Like NWP local sites, associated international sites run invitational summer institutes where teachers examine their classroom practice, study theory and research, and develop their own writing skills. During their school year, these teachers and professors provide professional development workshops in their schools and communities for teachers, administrators, and parents, and conduct research on literacy learning and professional development (National Writing Project, 2015).

After the institutes, the participating teachers go back to their schools and share new resources and ideas with colleagues. They are encouraged to take their own writing further and the follow-up conferences and continuity programmes motivate them to develop further. They have resources to reflect not only on their own writing, but also on the way they teach writing in their own discipline. The participating teachers are from a variety of disciplines, and now have the skills to embed writing within their own disciplines, which is the way to improve the writing of all learners (Carstens, 2013).

3. Describing the Writing Project in South Africa through the use of vignettes

Researchers have used vignettes across various disciplines to explore diverse issues.

Hughes (1998:381) describes vignettes as "stories about individuals, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions,

beliefs and attitudes to social issues". The use of vignettes is seen in studies in social research where qualitative data have been analysed as part of the researchers' own interpretation and commentary (Barter & Renold, 2000). Vignettes can be written up as case stories to explain examples, model best practices and to support instruction in education (Sucuoglu, Bakkaloglu, Iscen Karasu, Demir & Akalin, 2014) and to elicit responses from the participants.

This paper uses four vignettes to give an overview of Writing Institutes in South Africa, to determine if such institutes will assist teachers in addressing writing skills in schools and if their establishment as a formal program is feasible in the South African education environment. Each vignette is derived from a compilation of verbal and written accounts of participants and organisers at a Writing Institute in South Africa, from which the researchers extracted common threads. These vignettes afford the researchers an opportunity to capture meaning, beliefs and actions, which are embedded within the vignettes. The vignettes are used to answer the question as to what the potential value of implementing Writing Institutes in South Africa is and could be. The answer to this could inform research in the field of professional teacher development and teacher empowerment for writing education in South Africa. Freire and Freire (1994) refer to the voice that should be given to people and it is argued that Writing Institutes in South Africa will empower teachers to improve writing education and give them an opportunity for dialogue and collaboration about writing education, which will benefit not only the teachers themselves, but the learners with whom they are engaging. Teachers will be able to model and implement writing effectively as is proposed by Fischer (2002).

Institutes in all four vignettes are run along similar programmes. Every day starts off with a daily log. The log captures the events and spirit of the day. Loggers have to log and present at 8:30 each day on a rotating basis. The participants are encouraged to become researchers, leaders and writers. Interesting topics focused broadly on motivating learners, improving learner basic skills, parental involvement, spelling instruction and assessing student writing. Writing strategies are discussed and prompts are used to stimulate the senses to motivate the participants to write. Participants write extensively and have to complete individual writing pieces. Some writing time is allocated during the Institute. Final drafts are completed during the participants' time outside the Institute.

Participants have to work with a response and editing group, and share drafts with the larger group during the Authors' Chair. The Authors' Chair is a designated chair reserved for the individual who is sharing their writing. It is required of participants to complete final drafts of two to three pieces of writing for inclusion in a final anthology. The anthology is printed in book form and contains writings produced by each participant during the Institute. In addition to the writings, the anthology includes individual photos of participants as well as group shots of participants in writing and reading groups. Pieces must have been developed during the institute and go through revision and response cycles. At the end of each Writing Institute, each participant received a copy of the final document.

3.1 Vignette 1: The KwaZulu-Natal Writing Institute – Durban

The National Writing Project (NWP) has a history that goes back more than 15 years in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). In 1997 a high school teacher and teacher consultant from the Boston Writing Project began to work for a local non-profit organisation (NPO) whose mandate was to develop and improve English language skills among teachers from disadvantaged schools. She also worked with teachers in the rural areas around Ladysmith and Vryheid. In the course of this work she soon realized that the kind of professional development offered by the NWP would be an invaluable tool for local teachers (Ralfe, 2014).

Teachers in Natal were recruited to attend Summer Writing Institutes in the United States (US). Directors of various Writing Institute sites in the US were requested to host and support teachers from South Africa who were interested in attending Summer Writing Institutes. The teachers would pay their own airfare to the United States, but once they had landed they would be sponsored by an NWP site. In 1998 the first group of teachers went to the United States, and even more attended in 1999. These teachers suggested that a formal South African Writing Project affiliated with and supported by the NWP was the kind of professional development which would improve teaching and learning about writing in South Africa. An attempt was made by the South African participants to establish an NWP in South Africa. However, while all the parties were sympathetic, the issue of funding was the major stumbling block to getting the project off the ground.

In 2002 a delegation of five people from KZN, a headmaster from Vryheid, a teacher from Ladysmith, two people from the NGO sector, and one of the researchers representing the School of Education, University of Natal, attended the Annual Meeting of the NWP which took place in Atlanta, Georgia (Ralfe, 2014) and met with members of the NWP Board of Directors. The NWP had just opened a branch in Hong Kong attached to the Hong Kong University and were interested in developing a few select international sites following the United States model. Although there was considerable support for a site in KZN, the problem of funding remained and the project was postponed.

In August 2003 two teacher consultants from the Indiana Writing Project visited KZN. They had been hosting teachers from KZN at their Summer Writing Institutes for some years. Although, due to the timing of their visit, which was during term time, they were unable to offer a writing institute, they did visit Vryheid, Ladysmith and Durban and presented short writing workshops.

In 2004 the University of Durban-Westville and the University of Natal merged in accordance with the government's higher educational restructuring plans that eventually saw the number of higher institutions in South Africa reduced from 36 to 21. The merger gave birth to the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). At that time, the university management of the newly merged institution was unable to commit to becoming a formal Writing Institute site (Ralfe, 2014).

Over the years at least 50 teachers from KZN attended summer writing institutes with some returning to participate in Advanced Summer Institutes in the United States. Word of the NWP was spreading across the province. Teachers who had been to the United States to attend institutes came back and offered workshops to other teachers in schools around them. One of the language teaching modules in the B.ED programme at UKZN was structured around NWP writing institute methods so pre-service language teachers became familiar with them. A residential institute for 40 teacher librarians from rural areas was funded by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education. The rationale for this was to illustrate to the teachers the link between reading and writing and for them to assist language teachers by promoting and developing writing in their schools. However, none of these small initiatives attracted the support needed to establish a KwaZulu-Natal NWP site.

In 2010 the Regional English Language Office (RELO) at the US Embassy in Pretoria arranged for a group of teachers from KZN to attend a workshop presented by representatives from the NWP who were visiting South Africa. Later that year, three teacher educators (a lecturer from University of KwaZulu-Natal, one from University of Pretoria and one from the Cape Teaching and Leadership Institute) attended the NWP Annual Meeting in Orlando, Florida. The support of the US Embassy turned what had been a hope of starting a site in KZN into a reality and funding was made available through the office of the RELO in Pretoria.

In 2011 with the financial support of the US Embassy the first Winter Writing Institute was held in KZN. It was a residential workshop, which ran for a week at the UKZN Edgewood Campus. A US teacher consultant from Hawaii came to assist and facilitated the five-day Durban Winter Writing Project Institute at the UKZN Edgewood campus from July 3 to July 8, 2011. Twenty people attended. Sixteen classroom teachers, two Molteno trainers and an official from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education (KZN DoE) participated. The following year the US Embassy again supported them, but was unable to continue funding for a third year, so a proposal was sent to a private corporation based in Durban who agreed to fund the 2013 winter writing institute.

Findings from vignette 1

It remains a problem to establish a sustainable site in KZN as funding is an issue. Ideally, the KZN DoE should be supporting this sort of professional development, but they have severe budgetary constraints at present. A private organisation has been formed, with founding documents and a constitution, and is in the process of applying for NPO status in the hope that this will allow them to get funding more easily. The KZN Writing Project also intends to apply for accreditation from the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) in the near future. Continuity meetings take place regularly and are well attended. There is a determination to continue this work into the future. From discussions at the continuity meetings with previous participants it was concluded that teachers want to attend more Writing Institutes and need the support that has been provided. Teachers who attend these meetings all agree that it helps them to implement effective writing strategies in their classrooms.

3.2 Vignette 2: The Limpopo Writing Project

The Limpopo Writing Project is based on collaboration between the San Antonio Writing Project (based at the University of Texas at San Antonio) and the University of Limpopo in South Africa. In 2007, a lecturer from the University of Limpopo visited the University of Texas at San Antonio and met with the Director of the San Antonio Writing Project to request assistance to start a National Writing Project site at the University of Limpopo. Teacher consultants from the San Antonio Writing Project advised the lecturer to attend the next SAWP summer institute and to bring some of his teachers from South Africa with him. There were no funds for this, but the dean of the faculty paid for plane tickets for two teachers who were also graduate students at the University of Limpopo to initiate the project. The director of the San Antonio Institute hosted the two teachers for five weeks and paid for all their expenses. The lecturer spent two weeks at the institute funded by a research grant. In January of 2009, the first Limpopo Writing Project Invitational Institute was held at the University of Limpopo under leadership of the director of the San Antonio Writing Project, the lecturer and the two teachers. It was financed by funds raised by the San Antonio Writing Project and personal donations from San Antonio. This institute was repeated in 2010.

In January 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012, eleven to fifteen teachers in rural South Africa were sitting in a circle and writing stories about their lives for ten days. They wrote about their students who came to school to get an education, despite many hardships. The 2009 and 2010 institutes were funded through donations from family and friends. The 2011 and 2012 institutes were funded through the RELO, US Embassy, Pretoria, South Africa (Magoro, 2014). An NPO in the United States was created to help raise money for the Limpopo Writing Project.

Findings from Vignette 2

The initiatives have the potential to change the lives of many teachers. In 2011, the US Embassy of South Africa worked with the NWP to help fund writing projects in South Africa and send teachers from South Africa to the United States Writing Project sites such as the San Antonio Writing Project. These teachers went back to South Africa and shared their expertise with their students and other teachers. The San Antonio Writing Project hopes to continue the collaboration with the Limpopo Writing Project and other South Africa National Writing Project Sites well into the future. There are currently plans to arrange more Writing Institutes in Limpopo as teachers from schools in the area have indicated the need for support in the teaching of writing in their classrooms. Although this anecdotal evidence needs to be verified with needs analyses and more data, it can be concluded that teachers are eager to attend more Writing Institutes.

3.3 Vignette 3: The Cape Teaching and Leadership Institute Writing Project (CTLIWP) - Cape Town

The first winter writing institute at the Cape Teaching and Leadership Institute was initiated in 2011. The Cape Teaching and Leadership Institute (CTLI) in collaboration with Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), Mowbray and the US Embassy offered a five-day Winter Writing Institute from 4 to 8 July in 2011. An experienced director from one of the US Writing Institutes directed the institute at the Cape Teaching and Leadership Institute (CTLI) in Cape Town. The co-facilitator was a senior lecturer at CPUT. The Foundation Phase programme coordinator from CLTI and twenty-two educators from six districts in the Western Cape attended. Fifteen Foundation Phase teachers (Grade R to 3) and some Further Education and Training teachers (Grade 10 to 12) were also present.

The Head of Programme Delivery at the CTLI worked closely with the director and lecturers at CPUT. Several meetings were held in preparation for this project and CTLI was responsible for all logistical arrangements, including providing accommodation to the participants. An invitation to teachers was sent out via the eight Education Districts. The teachers were requested to write a motivational letter and state reasons why they were interested to participate in the Winter Writing Institute. Some teachers were desperately pleading to be accepted to participate in the writing institute. The Foundation Phase programme coordinator from CLTI was invited to participate in the Great Valley Writing Project in California, a six-week summer writing institute in the United States of America, in 2012, in order to prepare to be the next director of the Cape Teaching and Leadership Institute Writing Project (CTLI WP) in Cape Town.

At the end of 2012 an open invitation was extended via the Education Districts for interested educators to register and to participate in the writing institute in 2013. The motivational letters that the participants wrote as part of the application procedure, provided insight into why they wanted to participate in the institute. Telephonic interviews were scheduled with each participant for further sifting. The emphasis of the 2013 writing institute was on building a community of writing teachers. Participants who attended the writing institute had to have a broad interest in developing their writing skills, and becoming proficient at integrating the teaching of writing with technology. The writing institute focused on the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of educators to sustain their efforts to improve writing and learning for all learners. Similarly to what is done at the other institutes, elected participants attended a Super Saturday beforehand to prepare them for the winter writing institute, which took place during the school holidays, 24 June to 5 July from 08:30 until 14:30 every day.

Findings from Vignette 3

During the institute, participants were given the opportunity to demonstrate best practice. Participants offered a 60-minute presentation that focused on an aspect of writing related to their teaching grade or phase. They had to involve the audience (other participants) in a 'hands on' approach. The presentation had to connect to the

curriculum. At the end of the presentation the participants had to discuss the possibility of adapting the presentation to suit their grade levels. The presentations were then reworked after the input of fellow participants in preparation for presentation at Reading and Writing Conferences. At the end of the Institute participants were expected to take on leadership roles and work in their school communities to encourage writing and start writing workshops. The Winter Writing Institute participants from the Western Province presented their reworked presentations at the Reading and Writing Conference that took place on 26 and 27 September 2013. During the plenary session on the first day of the conference participants took turns to read one of their best writing pieces to the delegates. These were put together in the form of an anthology, which was printed in book form, with photos of participants. Each participant received a copy of the final document. The handing over of the completed anthology to each participant was the highlight of the conference.

During discussions between the researchers and the participants, they all indicated that they would recommend attending Writing Institutes to colleagues, as they felt more confident to teach writing skills across the curriculum after attending the institute. One teacher told the researchers that her learners were writing more than before and that the learners enjoyed her new approach to writing assignments. It was concluded that there is a need for more Writing Institutes in Cape Town. The researchers further concluded that the support and initiative from management at the Cape Teaching and Leadership Institute and the Department of Education in the Western Cape contributes to the continuing success of Writing Institutes in Cape Town.

3.4 Vignette 4: The Gauteng Writing Institute – Pretoria

A former dean of the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, learned about the NWP during a visit at Stanford University in 2007 and invited the executive director of their NWP to give workshops to teachers in South Africa. These workshops were presented at the University of Pretoria, Mamelodi campus for fifty-two teachers with support from the US Embassy. Following this, the campus director of the Mamelodi campus and a Mamelodi high school deputy principal, were sponsored by the US Embassy to attend the NWP in Ohio. The director of the NWP in Ohio came to South Africa in 2010 to spearhead the Gauteng project and to enhance formal Writing Project Institutes.

It was not until July 2011 that actual Writing Project Institutes were held in Gauteng. This breakthrough came due to the hard work and vision of the director of the NWP project in Ohio, who began working towards this goal in 2010 when she came to South Africa on a grant through the RELO at the US Embassy, Pretoria. During this time, she held two-day workshops at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban for 25 teachers, at the University of Pretoria, Mamelodi, for 52 teachers and principals and head of departments, and at the Limpopo Department of Education, for 50 course developers. In 2011, she returned to South Africa as an English Language Fellow, another grant through the RELO office. She held a Pre-Writing Project Institute in UKZN and facilitated the design of three Institutes at three sites; UKZN, the University of Limpopo and Cape Town Teaching and Learning Institute (CTLI.)

Two other experienced NWP members were recruited to assist in running the Winter Institutes and received grants through the RELO office. To move towards making the project sustainable, each American was matched with local educators to co-facilitate the Writing Project Institutes in Durban, Polokwane and Cape Town. Through collaboration, the local educators took part in the planning, organizing, coordinating and facilitating involved in running Writing Project Institute.

The University of Pretoria, in collaboration with the US Embassy, offered a 10-day Writing Institute for teachers on the Groenkloof campus in July 2012. The purpose of the Institute was to enhance writing practices of teachers across the teaching spectrum. The director of the 2012 Gauteng Writing Project, a visiting English Language Fellow (ELF) at the University of Pretoria at the time, presented the Institute along with lecturers from the University of Pretoria. The Institute was modelled on the idea of the Writing Institutes at the University of Ohio and the University of Texas at San Antonio.

The Gauteng Department of Education nominated 35 educators to be invited. These nominees included teachers from primary and high schools, as well as subject advisors from the Department of Education in Gauteng. The participants were accommodated at a local hotel near campus. The daily programme consisted of several opportunities for individual writing, sharing of writing in groups, research opportunities, computer lab sessions and book study sessions. Each participant was given a session to demonstrate best writing practices. Their demonstrations were then critiqued and discussed by the rest of the group. Guest speakers at the Institute were invited to present their research on literacy narratives that were used to enhance writing skills for undergraduate students. By the end of the Institute, each participant had to submit his or her own favourite piece of writing written during the Institute. The intention was to compile an anthology of these pieces, as is usually done at Writing Institutes in the United States. Unfortunately there was no funding available at that time to do so.

Findings from Vignette 4

After the Institute, the attendees completed surveys on their experience, which showed that they gained much from the Institute and felt there was a need for more Institutes in Gauteng. They were requested to take their ideas back to their schools and ‘teach’ their fellow teachers. A few months after the Institute, the attendees were invited to a follow-up workshop to discuss their perceptions on the longevity of the Writing Institute. Most of the participants attended this session. From discussions during this workshop, it was concluded that the teachers felt they needed more guidance and support on how to take the lessons learned at the Writing Institute further. The teachers felt that there was a need for more institutes in Gauteng and wanted the university to offer another Writing Institute. However, universities in South Africa do not have the capacity or the funding to do so as their core business is the preparation and training of pre-service teachers. It was suggested that this should be taken up by the Department of Education in the province. This is being investigated further.

4. Follow Up – Continuity Sessions and Debriefing

As a follow up to the institutes, Continuity Sessions were held with the participants in Durban and Cape Town on a Saturday a few weeks after the Writing Institutes were concluded. Fifteen of the twenty participants came to the Cape Town Continuity Session, and all reported that they had successfully implemented strategies they had learned in their classrooms. Thirteen participants attended the Continuity Session in Durban. Their feedback was also very positive and they felt they and their learners benefitted from the Writing Institutes as they were able to guide learners in their writing development.

An important follow up was a debriefing in Pretoria, under the auspices of the US Embassy in Pretoria, which was attended by lecturers, representatives from the Department of Basic Education, the RELO and other representatives of the US Embassy in Pretoria. Participants at the NWP Institutes in the US spoke about their participation in the Great Valley Writing Project at the University of California and the San Antonio Writing Project and elaborated on what they had learned from their experiences. Representatives from each of the South African Winter Institutes described their experiences and explained how they implemented what they had learned in their own classrooms. They commented on the benefits for their learners as they were able to teach writing across the curriculum more effectively than before. All the participants were involved in peer training at their own institutions and were initiating projects to guide their colleagues in writing. Each participant made suggestions as to how the Writing Institutes could be implemented more effectively but stressed the importance of more writing Institutes.

5. What do these vignettes reveal?

During continuing discussions with participants from all four sites during and after the Writing Institutes, they recommended unanimously that Writing Institutes should be continued. From the vignettes it is concluded that the Writing Institutes were received as positive interventions that lead to collaboration and professional development. The teachers identified a need for more institutes in their feedback. Although they implemented what they had learned, they need continuity and follow up support.

One solution to address the need for Writing Institutes, is for the Department of Education to host Writing Institutes as part of their in-service training programmes, as is happening in the Western Province. The teachers who attended the Writing Institutes recommended that writing institutes be held during school holidays to accommodate more teachers. In addition, shorter workshops on Saturdays could be implemented. Young Writers' workshops for learners could be explored to create opportunities for deep learning and sustainability. The teachers suggested further that participants at writing institutes should receive professional development (PDP) points for attending writing institutes.

The Writing Project in South Africa gives teachers the structure and opportunity to learn from one another and empowers them as educators. Through shared experiences and reflection, exposure to research, discussion and presentations, teachers gain confidence in themselves as learners and educators which benefits their learners (Steyn, 2011). The Writing Project is a cost effective, self-sustaining method of professional development for teachers. Teachers learn how to learn and how to teach. The Writing Project therefore is congruent with the South African Department of Education's Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for 2011 to 2025 (Department of Basic Education, 2011) in which it states that teachers are to be assisted to take responsibility for their own professional development and actively learn with colleagues in PLCs (Department of Basic Education, 2011:13).

6. Conclusion

Based on anecdotal feedback from the participants of all four vignettes, it seems that the Writing Institutes that were offered in South Africa addressed the teaching of writing across the curriculum. Despite the need for this programme the problem of funding and sustainability remains. An ideal solution is for the Department of Education to take ownership of Writing Institutes across South Africa, considering that this initiative is aligned with the educational goals for all South African learners. A good writing instruction programme is needed in South Africa and this study has provided evidence that Writing Institutes improve the writing of teachers and learners. The foundation for a National Writing Project has been laid. Now it is time for the South African National Writing Project to become a reality.

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