

## **A Situative Perspective on Developing Writing Pedagogy in a Teacher Professional Learning Community**

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The bulk of current research on teacher professional development is focused on teacher learning in the context of teacher professional learning communities (PLCs). In teacher PLCs, groups of teachers meet regularly to increase their own learning and the learning of their students. Teacher PLCs offer a learning model in which, “new ideas and strategies emerge, take root, and develop, and where competence can be truly cultivated and nurtured” (Lieberman & Miller, 2008, p. 2). Findings from this research suggests that teacher PLCs can lead to long-term capacity development and gains in student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Lieberman, & Miller, 2008; Lieberman, & Wood, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006).

Research on teacher professional development has recognized the nature of situated learning in the context of teacher PLCs (Putnam & Borko, 2000). Situative perspectives of teacher learning can provide a multi-focal research lens, affording the study of multiple units of analysis: the individuals, the community context, and the social interactions of teachers as they develop knowledge for teaching (Borko, 2004; Putnam & Borko, 2000). According to situated learning theory posited by Jean Lave (1996), as researchers approach the study of learning as a situated process, learning

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is not characterized exclusively in terms of knowledge acquisition or outcomes. Instead, by focusing on the interactions in and across particular social and physical contexts, learning is a process of social engagement or participation in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In this study, I focused on the situated nature of teacher learning in a PLC that was based on the lesson study model for teacher professional development. My primary units of analysis were the engagements of four middle school language arts teachers as they participated in a lesson study focused on teaching and learning writing. I defined engagements as participants' interactions with their own and each others' prior and locally shared experiences, forms of knowledge, and material resources. I selected this focus based on the situative analytic methods suggested by Lemke (1997) in his ecosocial systems model, where he suggests that the primary units of analysis are not things or people, but processes and practices. According to his views on situated cognition theory, Lemke (1997) posited that an ecosocial system includes not only humans in their situated physical environment, but also the social practices, meaning relations, and all interactions between humans and their material ecosystems.

My focus on participants' engagements also included a widened lens through which I studied how participants interacted with the features of the locally adapted teacher PLC model. These multiple foci involved my use of an integrated theoretical approach that combined social learning theory, situated cognition, and the principles of constructivism. As suggested by Borko (2004), "The ability to use multiple frameworks at the same time is a key strength of situative research perspectives" (p. 8). By foregrounding and detailing participants' engagements, I sought to provide a fuller, more complex account of how this locally designed teacher PLC fostered transformations in teachers' perceptions and pedagogy.

#### **Research Questions**

This study addressed the following research questions: What is the nature of participants' situated engagements in their collaborative inquiry about teaching and learning writing? How did these engagements contribute to transformations in teacher perspectives and pedagogy?

My findings are discussed in the following themes, which emerged from the data:

- (a) Participants synthesized their own and each others' prior knowledge, experiences, and resources from diverse theoretical frameworks in teaching and learning writing. By addressing tensions between the values inherent in these diverse experiences, resources, and practices, participants negotiated theoretical equilibrium in their approach to writing instruction.
- (b) As they negotiated theoretical tensions in teaching and learning writing, participants experienced transformations in their perspectives and pedagogy. Several participants had higher expectations of students, and all participants had increased notions of self-efficacy.

## Theoretical Framework

The process of learning, which is always situated, must be described in relation to the context through which it occurs. (Barab & Plucker, 2002, p. 173)

### ***Constructivism, Situated Cognition, and Social Learning Theory***

This study draws from a combination of two related theoretical frameworks: social learning theory and situated cognition. Both frameworks are grounded in the theoretical base of constructivism which suggests that, “multiple realities exist and that each reality is an intangible construction; rooted in people’s experiences with everyday life, and how they make sense of them” (Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005, p. 81). As people synthesize knowledge from a variety of contexts, they engage in a socially constructivist learning process. In other words, knowledge that is developed in the context of a particular discourse community is influenced by the views of the participants in that community. This knowledge is also influenced by the features, processes, and design of the context in which the knowledge construction takes place.

Situated cognition posits that “the situation in which a person learns becomes a fundamental part of what is learned” (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 6). In a similar vein, situated learning theory locates the processes of thinking and doing in particular settings and involves other learners, the environment, and the meaning making activities that contribute to new knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), participants in a socially situated “community of practice” construct knowledge from their engagements and interactions with other people, the environment, and raw materials that are introduced into the community. From this perspective, learning in a community of practice becomes a social process of engagement that integrates the situation with the activities of knowledge construction. This view of the social and situated aspects of learning shares a theoretical base with Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivist theory, which when applied to teacher knowledge development, posits teachers’ co-construction of knowledge as an appropriation and transformation of resources to solve locally identified problems in teaching and learning (Wells, 1999).

Social learning theory, as outlined by Wenger (1998), positions learning as social participation, proposes that learning is fundamentally experiential and social, and defines learning as the “realignment of experience and competence, the ability to negotiate new meanings, and the transformation of identity” (pp. 226-227). These characteristics of learning as inherently social are evidenced in studies of teacher knowledge growth that were developed in constructivist learning contexts, often referred to as social learning networks (Lieberman & Wood, 2003). One of the most noteworthy social learning networks for teachers is the National Writing Project (NWP). The NWP model for teacher professional development is structured for social interaction and knowledge co-construction as teachers develop their capacity to teach other teachers.

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Each of the four participants in this study had been involved in the NWP as teacher consultants or workshop participants. They were all familiar with the NWP inquiry model as an open-ended and flexible means to experiment with pedagogy and informally share ways that they have addressed issues in writing instruction (Lieberman & Wood, 2003). Participants had each engaged in some form of teacher action research, more recently referred to as “practitioner inquiry,” which involves collecting and analyzing data from teacher developed inquiries about interventions to question and/or improve teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Participants felt that the flexibility of the NWP collaborative inquiry model would be further enhanced by the observation feature of lesson study. Lesson study is a popular form of professional development in Japan which involves teams of teachers in collaborative action research. Lesson study teams select a topic, collaboratively develop lessons to address that topic, observe a teacher from the team deliver a lesson, collect and analyze data from student learning, revise or extend the lesson, and continue the cycle several times throughout the school year (Lewis, Perry, & Murata, 2006). Although lesson study in Japan is focused across content areas and grade levels, the body of research on lesson study in the United States is overwhelmingly focused on Math and Science. The present study, focused on middle school writing instruction, seeks to enrich the existing lesson study research.

## **Methodology**

There are few more urgent tasks than to design social infrastructures that foster learning. (Wenger, 1998, p. 227)

### **Research Design**

This research project was funded by a Cooperative Research and Extension Services for Schools (CRESS) collaborative grant, in partnership with a northern California research university, and a division of the NWP. The grant paid for substitute release days for four participants to observe each other deliver collaboratively planned model lessons and engage in the debriefing meetings that immediately followed the observations. The project began in August 2008 and continued through June 2010. This study is informed by data from the 2008-2009 school calendar years.

*The lesson study focus.* The overarching goals of the lesson study project included developing a knowledge base for teaching middle school writing. More specifically, participants were interested in developing effective and engaging lessons for teaching response to literature and persuasive writing to their culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse middle school students. Over the course of one school year, participants met monthly, communicated via email weekly, developed four model lessons, created a variety of writing scaffolds, observed each other deliver the lessons, debriefed and analyzed student work immediately following each observed lesson, and reflected on their understandings throughout the process.

*Advantages of multiple sites.* Recent research has documented that the advantages to locating teacher PLCs within individual school sites include developing a collective knowledge base across the site (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Nelson & Slavit, 2008). However, the present study has revealed certain advantages to locating the teacher PLC across multiple sites. The four participants in this lesson study teach in different school sites that vary from affluent to low-income and the student populations are markedly different. Each participant is not only from a separate school site, but also from a separate district where driving distances are up to an hour and a half away.

This variation across settings afforded a unique collaboration among teachers that is not common to many ongoing professional learning communities. In this way, a wide range of prior experiences was synthesized with local knowledge, and participants benefited from the diverse contexts in which these forms of knowledge were developed. This lesson study model engaged participants in a discourse community that was both in and out of the context of their own classrooms and student demographic. Collaboration across multiple school sites provided opportunities for participants to “break set and experience things in new ways” (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 7).

*Settings.* All planning and debriefing meetings were held in school site conference rooms, restaurants, or homes of participants. The classrooms of the participants made up the four settings that I refer to in this article. Two settings were affluent suburban schools where there was a majority of White middle class students and a minority of students of color, English learners, and low-income families. The other two classrooms were in large urban school districts that serve a majority of low income families, English Learners, students of color, and a minority of White middle-income students.

### ***Participants***

Following the National Writing Project institute fellows model, participants were recruited by teacher consultants and through recommendations from their school site administrators. I selected the four participating teachers that demonstrated a compelling and passionate interest in improving their writing instruction and a willingness to engage in critical self reflection. I narrowed from eight to four based on the teachers’ school locations and student demographics. I selected teachers who, across their four sites, worked with diverse groups of students and geographical locations. The four participants were from suburban and urban middle schools. All names of people and places in this article are pseudonyms.

Laura was an experienced NWP teacher consultant who taught on-level and honors seventh grade in an affluent suburban school. Laura was seen as a leader in her school site in the areas of literacy instruction and was highly regarded by her administrator. In her principal’s view, Laura was a very well respected teacher in

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the community. The overwhelming majority of her students are from white middle to high-income families.

Elizabeth was a second year honors seventh and eighth grade teacher in a different district from Laura, yet also in an affluent suburban school. Elizabeth was seen as a “rising star” by her administrator who was very impressed by her rapport with students and families, as well as her enthusiasm for, and commitment to, professional growth. Elizabeth’s classes were more culturally and economically diverse than Laura’s, yet white affluent students were in the majority.

Rachel taught eighth grade in a culturally and linguistically diverse school in a large urban district. She was a NWP teacher consultant and a leader in her school language arts department. Rachel was considered a resident expert at her site in supporting the literacy and academic achievement of English learners. Rachel taught Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) and intervention language arts classes to students from a wide variety of cultural and language backgrounds. Most of the students in Rachel’s SDAIE class scored at the intermediate level on the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). At Rachel’s middle school site, all English Learners, from beginner to early advanced, are placed together in SDAIE classes. When students are reclassified, they are placed in mainstream classes. The overwhelming number of her students was identified as low-income by the California state free and reduced price lunch criteria. Rachel did not have any students who self-identified as Caucasian in the classes we observed.

Talia was also an eighth grade language arts teacher in a diverse urban school site that had a similar cultural and linguistic diversity as Rachel’s site. Talia was open to trying new things and actively embraced inquiry, critical reflection, and pedagogical change. Unfortunately for Talia, she believed that her school site department team did not share her views on professional growth and change.

Although I sought cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity among participants, the participants I selected represent the current majority demographic of teachers in the United States; they were all Caucasian, middle class, and female, between the ages of 26 and 40. The differences in the participants’ school and classroom demographics, however, played an important role in the interactions between teachers and contributed to the unique nature of this research context.

#### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

My primary units of analysis were the processes and practices that emerged from studying the nature of participants’ engagements in their locally designed teacher PLC. Extensive field notes from my observations of participants’ behavior were collected at each of their meetings and during the group observations. All discussions through the planning stages, observations, debriefing meetings, and lesson revisions were audio taped and transcribed. I triangulated these data with email communication, interviews, and written reflections from each participating teacher. I also collected

and analyzed a wide variety of data from all teacher-created materials and the curriculum resources that were used in participants' lesson designs.

I took a grounded theory approach to qualitative data collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data analysis involved applying the "constant comparative method" (Merriam, 2003), by coding and categorizing data from all sources in order to "fracture the data and force interpretation" (Strauss, 1987 p. 55). Two themes were revealed through coding and categorizing patterns in participants' discourse and behavior. The first theme, theoretical equilibrium, emerged as participants synthesized and sought to balance diverse forms of knowledge, experiences, resources, and approaches for teaching and learning writing. The second theme, transformation, emerged as an outcome of participants' synthesis of knowledge and their balance-or theoretical equilibrium- between competing values. Transformation refers to generative changes in perceptions and practices that were evidenced by the data. In order to instantiate transformations, I sought clear, correlative connections that revealed participants' perceptions and practices both prior to and after a transformative engagement. I was able to find conclusive evidence for transformative shifts among three out of the four participants.

## **Findings**

The central challenge for educators is to develop participatory structures that bring together the individual, environment, and socio-cultural relations. (Barab & Plucker, 2002, p. 176)

In this section I will describe the nature of participants' socially situated engagements in the following themes:

- (a) Participants synthesized their own and each others' prior knowledge, experiences, and resources from divergent theoretical frameworks in teaching and learning writing. They negotiated theoretical equilibrium by addressing tensions between the values inherent in these diverse experiences, resources, and practices.
- (b) As they synthesized and negotiated theoretical tensions in teaching and learning writing, participants experienced transformations in their perspectives and pedagogy. Participants' synthesis of knowledge from a wide range of experiences, knowledge, and resources fostered their negotiation of conflicting values in teaching and learning writing. These engagements were the catalysts for participants' transformed perspectives and pedagogy.

In the following sections I describe how participants' synthesis and balance of diverse values in teaching and learning writing contributed to their transformed perspectives and pedagogy.

***Participants' Synthesis of Knowledge, Experiences,  
and Resources from Diverse Theoretical Frameworks***

Prior to this study, participants had each developed their knowledge base for writing instruction in a variety of learning contexts that ranged from the transmission model of district curriculum trainings, to the social network learning model of the National Writing Project. During the planning meetings of this lesson study, participants shared experiences and resources that they acquired from California Standards Test (CST) preparation trainings as well as in NWP workshops. The materials from the CST trainings were structured and formulaic, requiring teachers and students to follow strict rules in formatting their writing. In the CST training guides, teachers were advised to conduct explicit and direct instruction in setting up and structuring writing that responded to sample writing prompts and scoring rubrics. The theoretical frameworks that support these resources are consistent with the positivist paradigm that suggests that teaching and learning writing can be standardized (Gipps, 1988).

In contrast to these materials, teachers also brought in resources from NWP workshops that involved engaging students in multi-modal, discovery-based activities to access prior knowledge and develop points of view for writing. The NWP resources focused on process writing, emphasizing revision and multiple drafts. The theoretical underpinnings of these resources tend to be more located in the interpretivist camp which suggests that rigid methodological dogma is not productive for teaching and learning writing and which values individual differences in interpretation or perspective (Barritt, 1994).

Participants were interested in including resources from both the positivist and interpretivist theoretical frameworks as they found value in both perspectives. They believed they could best serve their students if they were inclusive of divergent approaches to teaching and learning writing. As they discussed each resource, participants shared prior knowledge and experiences adapting the various resources. They were engaged in synthesizing not only the values that support the materials, but their knowledge and experiences using these materials with their diverse student populations as well.

*Synthesis of knowledge through inter-contextualization.* Participants engaged in recursive interactions between their shared and prior experiences teaching writing. I refer to this as an inter-contextuality that I found evidence to support throughout this study. For example, participants' discourse during planning and debriefing meetings traveled inside and outside the multiple classroom settings of their shared inquiry. Participants synthesized prior knowledge from multiple contexts in order to co-construct new knowledge for teaching writing. In other words, the situated learning experiences of the group were not confined to discussions around their shared, local experiences but were interactions between both prior and current knowledge-their own and each other's. According to Wenger (1998), "It is not

necessary that a repertoire be completely locally produced. In fact, the bulk of the repertoire in most communities of practice is imported, adopted, and adapted for their own purposes” (p. 126). Although participants shared a learning context and co-constructed knowledge locally, they imported knowledge and experiences from multiple teaching and learning contexts.

The following exchange reflects a pattern of shifting back and forth from the shared experiences of the group to interaction with their own and each other’s prior experiences, choices, and practices. In the following example, participants were in the early stages of a lesson design. They were synthesizing their understandings of their own and each other’s experiences teaching writing and integrating resources from both standardized and discovery-based approaches to writing instruction:

*Talia:* I always struggle with this (the independent writing) part of the lesson (looking at an outline created in an NWP workshop).

*Laura:* So, you gave them strong examples and you gave them some templates?

*Talia:* No, I have not given them templates before (looking at the CST created templates).

*Laura:* Ok—that (the CST template) will definitely help....and also...as I am walking around and the students are raising their hands I ask them questions like, ‘What do you think? What is the quote saying about...?’ I am just constantly prompting them.

*Talia:* That is what I feel like too, I am always prompting-especially with my English learners. It is good to get them talking.

*Rachel:* My students still need it so I prompt all the time....Like for character traits, I use this character map (sharing her graphic organizer that she created) and I will go around the room and remind students what that means even after I explained it. Kids need that constant interaction and feedback from the teacher.

In this discussion, participants were sharing their experiences teaching writing through the use of both fill-in-the-blank templates and their dialogue with students as students were writing. Throughout this study, similar discussions included references to both standardized and experiential teaching methods that were designed to encourage students to develop their thinking for writing. Discourse patterns revealed a tendency for participants to integrate diverse teaching methods with their feedback and dialogue with students. These patterns resulted from discussions of prior experiences teaching writing and adapting resource materials. This exchange illustrates an inter-contextuality that afforded participants insights into each other’s prior experiences teaching writing in multiple teaching and learning contexts. In this inter-contextualized discourse community, participants’ diverse experiences and resources for writing instruction were shared in an open forum that allowed for divergent theories about writing to be negotiated.

Participants’ negotiation of theoretical equilibrium. As they discussed the

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diverse resources that they introduced into their lesson study, participants negotiated balance between competing theories in teaching and learning writing. They wanted to include a range of explicit and discovery-based instructional tools in order to provide a wide variety of experiences and opportunities for their students. Participants sought theoretical equilibrium by including activities and instructional methods that represented the broad spectrum of philosophical foundations in teaching and learning writing. From direct teaching to collaborative writing, participants believed in a time and a place for (almost) everything in writing instruction. The following remark expresses participants' shared values as they balanced and integrated multiple modalities into their lessons: "What do I think kids need? They need everything- it's all important."

Despite their declaration that students "need everything," participants also believed that their students had a wealth of prior knowledge that could be tapped through multi-modal activities in order to engage them in writing. However, with respect to writing, they felt that their students needed explicit instruction and structure to guide their development as writers. As a result, participants were engaged in on-going investigation into the degree to which too much structure can stifle some writers, and not enough structure can stall others. How much to support and when to let go presented a tension that involved participants in the consistent negotiation of theoretical equilibrium. For example, as participants negotiated between too much direct support and when to use scaffolds, they sought to balance explicit writing instruction with independent writing practice.

Participants sought to balance direct instruction with independent writing experiences by providing opportunities for students to make choices during writing instruction. The following exchange illustrates participants' negotiation of theoretical equilibrium as they sought to integrate student choice into a somewhat formulaic approach to teaching persuasive writing:

*Talia:* I've been kind of feeling like I've been too narrow... my approach to persuasive has been to give the practice prompts from the CST and not really give choices...

*Laura:* I have done it both ways... I found it's best to give some options (for students to choose topics or prompts)...

*Elizabeth:* Yeah. Well, except... I'm not sure... for the first couple I would still use some of the CST prompts, some of the topics they might choose are pretty controversial. I might cut off some of the options depending on how they could be offensive to other kids and parents.

The desire to move away from formulaic structures and encourage students to write independently was particularly troubling for Rachel at the early stages of the project. Toward the end of the lesson study, however, Rachel developed ways to balance student choice with teacher-directed activities. Rachel's following remarks illustrate her progress toward a more balanced approach to teaching and learning writing:

*Rachel:* I'm so glad I finally did it... I thought, should I give them a list of topics and let them do their own research for a topic? So, at the beginning of the quarter, the 3rd quarter actually, I had done a survey, on topics that they're interested in (for persuasive writing), so I just pulled the topics from that. I photocopied articles for (students) from 'Time for Kids', because the grade level of reading is so varying, that I thought that would be something suitable for their level... then I let them choose what they were interested in (to write about).

Participants shared an interest in providing a variety of experiences to their students in order to engage students in thinking for writing. Rachel's negotiation of balance in her approach to teaching writing both arose from and contributed to her shifts in perception about her students' abilities. These shifts in perception were developed in response to her observation of Laura teach a lesson that participants had planned together in the beginning stages of the lesson study project. Rachel reflected after an earlier observation of Laura:

*Rachel:* I saw the level of writing of Laura's kids, I wanted to go home and cry. I was "Oh, my God..." Only because I felt so guilty that I wasn't pushing them to that level, because why shouldn't I?

Rachel expressed to the group that she was committed to providing the same experiences for her SDAIE students that she observed Laura teach her Honors students. In Laura's lesson, students were invited to choose their own topics and develop their points of view for their persuasive essays. Additionally, Laura presented outlines, templates, and scaffolds for student to use as "guides rather than as rules" and encouraged students to adapt these scaffolds to meet their individual needs. By the end of the lesson study project, Rachel had provided multiple opportunities for her students to choose topics, templates, literature, peer partners, style, and formats for writing.

Participants negotiated balance between too much and not enough structure in writing instruction, and as a result, they developed writing lessons that integrated diverse approaches to writing instruction. Each model lesson was designed as an amalgamation of contrasting philosophies in an attempt not to reconcile contrasting theories, but rather to allow for their inclusion. This dialectical approach finds support in Vygotskian social learning theory, which posits that learning necessarily involves the unification of contradictions (Wells, 1999). As participants' engaged in their quest for theoretical equilibrium, they experienced shifts in their perception of students' abilities and changes in their practices.

### ***Transformations in Perspectives and Pedagogy***

Participants' synthesis of diverse prior and local knowledge, experiences, and resources encouraged them to seek theoretical equilibrium in their teaching by including a variety of approaches from explicit instruction to multi-modal activities in their writing lessons. In this section, I illustrate how the tensions that were

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negotiated in the pursuit of theoretical equilibrium inspired transformations in perspectives, expectations of students, and self-efficacy. I have selected examples from three teachers that had noticeable shifts in perspectives or pedagogy. Each of the participating teachers is mentioned in these examples except Elizabeth. Although Elizabeth communicated that she valued her experiences in this project, and her participation was highly valued by the team, I did not find enough evidence in the 2008-2009 data to instantiate a clear transformation for Elizabeth.

*Transformed perspective: teaching against the grain.* Early in the project, Laura expressed her concern that over the course her entire teaching career, she had approached response to literature as a limited opportunity for students to address character traits and theme. She felt that her pedagogy had been too strongly influenced by the pressure to prepare students for CST on-demand writing assessments. As Laura synthesized various resources and integrated divergent theories in teaching and learning writing throughout this project, she expanded her ideas for teaching response to literature. By the end of the collaborative inquiry, Laura began to put together her ideas for revising her response to literature lessons. She focused on the potential variations in format and style within and across the traditional writing genres. Laura later shared materials that she had adapted for her future teaching in the response to literature genre. These materials included activities to engage her students in thinking and writing about the various points of view of literary characters as well as ethical dilemmas in literature. The other participants were notably engaged in the feedback that they had provided to Laura, and they shared in Laura's enthusiasm for revising her approach to the response to literature genre.

The following exchange illustrates how participants interacted with Laura's ideas as they negotiated an alternative approach to teaching response to literature. Laura's initial concerns suggested that teacher transformation involves a degree of risk taking. In order for Laura to feel confident in reforming her approach to teaching response to literature, she believed she needed honest and critical feedback from her peers:

*Laura:* I feel like it's too narrow. What we (Laura's school site department) do is too narrow and I need somebody to bounce ideas off of... But you guys have to be honest with me because it's too big of a thing to just change my whole writing program... I was thinking about focusing this first essay prompt on ethics. An example of a prompt could be, "Is Riki's response a common human response? Provide textual evidence to justify your interpretations... draw connections between Riki Tiki Tavi and another text, your personal life, and even something in society." And so when they (students) get in an on-demand writing situation, they could think... "This is how I can answer this."

*Elizabeth:* Ah ha. I do agree that my students did not leave this year with the understanding that there was more than one way to respond to a piece of literature. They (students) thought response to literature was two (character) traits and a

theme because that's what we (Elizabeth's school site department) did this year. And so one thing I do like about that (Laura's idea) is it does show that there is more than one way to respond to a piece of literature.

In these two examples, Elizabeth and Laura discussed that their limited approach to teaching response to literature reflected the curricular decisions that were made in their school departments. Changes in instruction that contrast with colleagues' approaches can be difficult to negotiate. In this exchange, however, participants discussed their ideas in terms of how these ideas could impact their students' learning. They were not inhibited by the risk of upsetting their school site colleagues. This is an important consideration for teachers as they negotiate transformation. If the benefits of the changes do not outweigh the risk of losing collegial support, the changes are not likely to be adopted. With the support of the participants in this professional learning community, participants felt they could make changes in their teaching while still maintaining integrity in their school programs.

These transformed perceptions point back to the design of this multi site-based learning model as an open forum for philosophically inconsistent forms of knowledge, resources, and experiences. Although Laura's ideas were met with great enthusiasm and interest in this inquiry group, she eventually did encounter resistance from her school site department team and her principal. Because Laura teaches in a school that enjoys high test scores on CST on-demand writing, her principal was apprehensive about Laura changing any of her practices in writing instruction. Laura told participants that her principal's response to her suggestion was, "If it isn't broken, why fix it?" Laura disagreed with her principal and site team and intended to significantly alter her future teaching in this genre. Laura believed that if she neglected to engage her students in a variety of ways to respond to literature then her own pedagogy, "Is broken."

In her written reflections, Laura attributed her transformed perspective to the observation feature of the learning model which afforded her the opportunity to observe other participants challenge their students in unexpected ways. For example, when Laura commented that students "rose to high expectations" in the culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms, she changed her repertoire to include more challenging writing activities for her Honors students. This aspect of my findings was similar to a study conducted by university teacher educators which suggested that the "Third space" created by the fusion of experiential learning with the theoretical methods course provided a place "where multiple cultural ways of being, habits, and practices from different spaces and contexts are brought together in a shared context" (Kelly, Hart & King, 2007 p. 94). The advantage of collaborating across multiple sites proved particularly useful for Laura to experiment by varying the ways she designed instruction in the traditionally tested writing genres.

Socially situated learning is based on the notion that the situations, or contexts for engagement, are intertwined with the construction of knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Multiple situations, contexts, and settings further enhanced

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participants' knowledge development for teaching writing. The multi-site based, inter-contextualized nature of this inquiry was also a fundamental feature in the transformed expectations of Talia, which I detail in the following section.

*Transformed perspectives: Higher expectations of students.* Evidence in the literature on teacher PLCs has connected teachers' higher expectations of students' abilities to gains in student achievement (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Participants' transformed expectations of students' abilities directly resulted from observing students perform in authentic learning situations. The multi-site, inter-contextualized design of this learning model afforded Talia the opportunity to develop new perceptions about her students' abilities.

Talia believed that her school site's Language Arts department was entrenched in teaching norms that didn't embrace inquiry and emphasized a deficit model toward students, English learners in particular. She regularly shared her frustrations that teachers from her site were unwilling to try some of the things that she suggested because they believed that their students were too "low." Although she recognized and communicated to the lesson study group her frustration with her colleagues' deficit perspectives, she admittedly held some herself. For instance, during a lesson planning meeting, participants were engaged in designing multi-modal activities that included student collaborative writing. Talia was initially reluctant to assign collaborative writing activities to her students and she suggested that it could be "the blind leading the blind". However, Talia's observation of Rachel's SDAIE class engaging in collaborative writing strongly influenced her perception of her own student's abilities. Many of Talia's students, like Rachel's, were English learners, but they had far greater English fluency than Rachel's SDAIE students, who were typically intermediate level English learners. The following remarks from Talia reveal her changed perceptions after reflecting on her observation of Rachel's students:

*Talia:* I thought—it's only one paragraph—they need to do it individually. I didn't want it (collaborative writing) to happen at first, because I was afraid the blind would lead the blind, but ...watching your SDAIE kids working in pairs, I think now it might be useful to not give them the restricted scaffold, but to use each other to construct it.

This example illustrated how Talia's engagement in reflective practice after observing Rachel's model lesson, altered her expectations of her students' abilities. She had not believed initially that her students could do collaborative writing until she witnessed students with far less English fluency performing these tasks successfully. Talia's written reflections at the end of the year showed a deep and genuine interest in continuing to include interpersonal communication activities and collaborative writing activities for her students who are learning English as a second language. Further research is necessary to confirm that these expressed transformations in thinking about teaching will manifest themselves in participants' future practice. Yet the opportunity to observe students perform a variety of tasks across multiple

settings was transformative not only for Talia, but for Rachel and Laura as well. Examples are further detailed in the next section.

*Transformations in perceptions of self-efficacy.* Much of the research on lesson study has suggested that the lesson study context affords opportunities most effectively when there is an understanding among participants that everyone has gaps in their knowledge and can improve their teaching (Lewis et al. 2006). Comments such as, “I’m very vulnerable in teaching writing, so I really want to explore areas I need to improve on this year” and “I’m looking to learn” are evidenced throughout this study as participants openly shared their shortcomings and successes in teaching writing.

Inspired by their new knowledge, participants set future goals. This is the essence of self efficacy, which relates to a person’s perception of their ability to reach a goal (Bandura, 1997). As participants defined some of their goals for future inquiry, they seemed to grow more confident in their practice. Throughout this study, Rachel negotiated between too much structural support for her SDAIE students and not enough independent practice. Specific features of the learning model, such as collaborative lesson planning, observations, and debriefing meetings afforded Rachel opportunities to make significant inroads into her resolution of these tensions. The following exchange illustrates much of the ongoing discourse between Rachel and the other participants as she regularly negotiated between structure and independent writing throughout the collaboration:

*Rachel:* Some of them (students) get really annoyed, and they call it (the fill-in-the-blank scaffolds) “baby” and they don’t want it, but they’re stuck....

*Laura:* Obviously we’ve got completely different populations, and I’m aware of that. But I feel like they have to feel comfortable. And if they don’t feel like they can be successful, then they’re going to shut down and not do it. And I thought it was so cool in there, that they’re in there (Rachel’s SDAIE class), and they were listening to you (Rachel), and they were there with you (Rachel).

In this exchange, Laura supported Rachel’s use of fill-in-the-blank writing templates as she also complimented Rachel’s rapport with her students. As the lesson study progressed into the spring, Rachel experimented with diminishing the use of these supports. The following comment reflects Rachel’s increased notions of self-efficacy as she began to reach the goal she had set for herself; she began to balance support with independent writing:

*Rachel:* The more I take away scaffolding, the more they struggle, but I’m ok with that... it’s going to be a lot of practice,—me taking away scaffolding—them struggling—me coming back, and seeing what they’re struggling with—and saying-let’s try it again. Because I feel if I constantly give them that scaffold, they’ll never have the experiences they need, on their own, and putting it together on their own.

As evidenced in her comment, Rachel had begun to remove the scaffolds and had gone through several phases of what she described here as a cycle of support-inde-

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pendent practice-students struggling-support, and continued cycle. She had resolved that balancing guidance with independent practice was more productive in the long run for her students, and she felt more confident letting go of the fill-in-the-blank supports. Rachel reflected that her experiences observing other participants as well as the planning and debriefing meetings in this collaborative inquiry inspired her to reduce these types of scaffolds.

Participants' engagement in the observation and debriefing component of the lesson study made a significant impact on their practice. Much of my data analysis points toward the observation and collaborative planning processes as catalysts for synthesizing various forms of prior knowledge and experiences. The observations also afforded glimpses into other participants' pedagogy that were not exclusive to writing instruction. For example, Laura taught on-level and Honors seventh grade in an affluent suburban school and Talia taught low-income students that were also culturally and linguistically diverse. As Laura reflected on her own experiences after observing Talia, Laura's remarks reflect a process of recursive interaction between her own teaching and the teaching she observed in the lesson study:

*Laura:* A big aha for me is pacing. I tend to just give it to them and while 80-95% of my students do get it the first time, perhaps that percentage is just not good enough. Even the percentage that is getting it would benefit by chunking lessons in smaller parts like Talia did or by slowing the pace. I am definitely going to do this next year with my writing.

As Laura observed Talia's significantly slower pace, Laura reflected on her own pacing and its effects on student learning. Laura felt that if she were teaching a concept or skill effectively then *all* of her students should "get it." The school climate in which all teachers operate involves some degree of norms in curricular pacing. As Laura made the decision to slow down her instructional pace, she chose depth over breadth in her teaching, and risked upsetting her school site colleagues. This decision was an act of personal agency, which lies at the heart of increased self-efficacy. According to Bandura (2001), "to be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one's actions" (p. 2). Throughout this lesson study project, as participants synthesized knowledge, experiences, and resources, they negotiated and sought what I termed, theoretical equilibrium, in order to balance diverse approaches to writing instruction. These engagements inspired agency and increased self-efficacy, particularly toward aspects of writing instruction that participants felt were challenging: pacing, scaffolding, and integrating multi-modal, collaborative activities for student engagement. As participants investigated these issues, in the various contexts of the lesson study, they experienced authentic transformations in their perceptions and pedagogy.

### **Discussion**

According to Barab and Plucker, (2002) "Educators cannot design learning or

talented individuals; instead, they design contexts for engaging talent development and support successful participation” (p. 175). In this study, participants engaged in the design and modification of their learning context through their collaborative topic selection, co-planned lessons, observations, and collaborative analysis of student work. Thus, participants adapted the learning model to suit their shared learning needs relative to their individual classroom contexts. This teacher-driven professional learning community offered unique opportunities for participants to synthesize and integrate a wide array of resources that drew from diverse theoretical frameworks in teaching and learning writing. As participants investigated how various approaches to teaching and learning writing engaged their students, they raised their expectations and lessened their focus on students’ deficiencies.

Findings from this study suggested that even well-meaning teachers may have limited expectations and lower standards for some of their students, particularly English learners. A teacher’s deficit perspective, combined with an overuse of standardized teaching resources, contributes little to inspire student learning. Explicit and formulaic instructional approaches alone may disengage students, limit students’ level of participation, reinforce teachers’ deficit views, and perpetuate a cycle of underachievement.

A central challenge for educators is to make literacy not only possible, but meaningful for all students. In multicultural classrooms where there is rich linguistic diversity, teachers must engage students in literacy activities both explicitly and experientially (Colombi & Schleppegrell, 2002). The synthesis and integration of various instructional approaches, specifically those that engage students in multimodal and collaborative activities, may hold greater promise for engaging all students in meaningful writing experiences.

### **Research Implications**

According to Kirshner and Whitson (1997), “The critical strategic requirement for situated cognition theory is to shift the focus from the individual as the unit of analysis toward the socio- cultural setting in which activities are embedded” (p. 5). Further, they advocate for “focusing on the interrelations within the activity systems” (p. 6). In this study, I focused on the socially situated interactions among participants, their multiple classroom and experiential contexts, and a variety of material resources. As I focused on both the grounded and abstracted interactions between participants and the features of their collaborative inquiry model, I aimed to provide a complex account of how this professional learning community fostered teacher learning. In other words, this study not only described the ends in teacher learning outcomes, but also highlighted the means to those ends. More research on teachers’ situated engagements as they construct knowledge for teaching is needed in order to illustrate ways that professional learning communities can meet the learning needs of teachers so that teachers can meet the learning needs of their students.

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