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## Reclaiming and Composing Our Professional Lives: A Young Writing Project Learns a Language of Inquiry to Establish, Thicken, and Sustain Its Work

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### Abstract

In coaching fellows of the Piasa Bluffs Writing Project to take up an inquiry stance toward teaching practice, we are learning the fundamental role inquiry plays in improving practice and impacting student learning. Placing inquiry at the heart of professional development, however, is challenging given the climate of high-stakes testing, which operates from a deficit-mode of thinking, a philosophy seeing students and teachers as ill-equipped or lacking. Thus a quick-fix and one-shot in-service culture has developed, complete with “experts” offering “magic pills” to cure the ills of teachers. This essay chronicles the unfolding history of a young writing project site as it, along with its new fellows, develops new and inclusive professional spaces to reshape what counts as professional development for teachers. It narrates, from an ethnographic perspective, the ways in which a new writing project community was constructed, oriented by the teachers-teaching-teachers conceptual stance of the National Writing Project, making inquiry, in its diverse manifestations, the intellectual sustenance that nourishes local professionals. It theorizes the positive far-reaching consequences for teachers and their students, when a professional learning community explores the relationship between teachers becoming teacher-researchers who revise and reform their practices through writing in community.

### Introduction

*“Patti, maybe the fact that we are asking questions is enough or almost enough? Sure, we need to make connections and say statements and such that sound smart. But in general, if we work*

*at being inquirers, we are growing as teachers. We are learning and we are opening doors for students to learn and ask and wonder; that is what we are learning to do together.”*

—Amanda, Second Grade Teacher, Fall 2008

The Piasa Bluffs Writing Project received federal funding from the National Writing Project and conducted its first Invitational Summer Institute (ISI)<sup>1</sup> during summer 2008. As explained in the introductory chapter, the ISI is a critical component of all writing project sites. As leaders in the Piasa Bluffs Writing Project site, we wondered what happens when a National Writing Project site integrates explicit language of inquiry within its ISI? How does this help its members to re-see teaching practices and underlying beliefs and in re-seeing them, reform them? And what are the long-term benefits, after the ISI, that justify cultivating a professional community centered on inquiring stances to teaching and learning? These questions emerged for us as we engaged in shared inquiries to examine our conception of our site and its role related to how its summer institute fellows and future teacher-consultants (TC) grow as reflective practitioners. This became the basis for grounding our ISI in inquiry and designing a continuity graduate course to sustain ongoing inquiry into our teaching practices.

Amanda produced her reflection during an electronic online dialogue on the Piasa Bluffs – Teacher Inquiry Community (PB-TIC) blog. The blog provides a designated space where fellows from our 2008 ISI engage in asynchronous reflective writing about insights from their ongoing questions and inquiries from their classroom settings. PB-TIC constitutes a formal group of 2008 fellows enrolled in a graduate class designed as continuity following the ISI. Fellows, in collaboration with the university-based site-director and school-based codirector, developed the graduate-level course to support individual and shared inquiries into teaching practices. The course and blog provide the learning space and professional resources for continuity between the initial insights developed during the ISI, ongoing intellectual growth for improving teaching practices, and actualizing teaching for learning in K–12 classrooms.

Like the ISI itself, often likened to a “third space” where classroom and university overlap, this special issue of *scholarlypartnershipsedu* prompted us to engage in this professional writing process to further examine the rippling effect of how professional lives continue to grow from seeds of professional awakening that occurs during the ISI. Parallel to teaching inquiry for reflective practice, the collaborative inquiry among writing project site leaders provides insight to inform upcoming institutes, in this case the 2009 PB-ISI. The Piasa Bluffs Writing Project’s history and its diverse voices animate how and why we ground our work in inquiry.

In collaboration with *scholarlypartnershipsedu*, we make visible the sometimes invisible work beneath the actions of a National Writing Project site to redefine teaching as an

ongoing reform process and professional development. In particular, we reveal the role that inquiry can play in a site's development by studying what counts as inquiry as situated phenomena as we seek to understand how this particular view of inquiry shaped our site's historicity. Thus, we can examine its historicity as a legacy record in search of evidence of participants' individual and shared belief systems, how they are initiated, transformed over time, and consequentially progress (Wink & Putney, 2002) to transform beliefs about teaching and learning. In doing so, we can make visible the consequences for how professional learning spaces — physical, temporal, and electronic — inform the ways participants come to see themselves as agents of change. The ISI provides space for teachers to gain knowledge concerning the process of writing and teaching writing as a process, share their knowledge of experiences, and integrate new insights. The PB-TIC provides space for continuing the professional development process as participants interface with their students in the K–12 context and reflect in relationship to a professional community. *scholarlypartnershipsedu* provides one more layer of the inquiry process by creating spaces to share lessons learned with the broader community of National Writing Project sites and teachers of writing in general.

### Developing a Conceptual Language to See a Site's Work as Inquiry-in-Action

Teaching and learning to teach are deeply rooted cultural practices that require space and time to develop, understand, and transform. Education researcher Larry Cuban (1993) employs the metaphor of a hurricane's powerful winds sweeping across an ocean's surface to help understand the challenges of educational reform: "At the surface, they produce powerful waves, but down below on the ocean floor there is unruffled calm" (p. 2). Therefore, as we conceptualized the ISI in the context of Piasa Bluffs, it became imperative to understand *how* teachers contribute to develop professional learning spaces wherein they develop dispositions that ultimately impact their classroom practice, and to ascertain if and how those learned dispositions and skills are put into practice during subsequent teaching experiences and contexts.

The views of Ralph, Jeffrey, and Patricia, as codirectors<sup>2</sup> of the PB-ISI, are grounded in an interactional ethnographic perspective (Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1995), which allows them to understand classrooms as cultures (Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group 1992a & b) and knowledge as situated and socially constructed. From this perspective, they examine the ways inquiry stances were formulated and transformed across the history of a new writing project site by drawing on theories from anthropology (Frake, 1977; Gumperz, 1986; Spradley, 1980), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; Ivanic, 1994), and literary theory (Bakhtin, 1986/1935). Applying this theoretical stance to PBWP's ISI, they can conceive of "classrooms" as dynamic, ever-evolving communities, where both cultures and texts are jointly, socially, discursively

constructed by its members. They can expand this perspective to explore how cultures are made within and across temporal settings. Learning, therefore, can be seen as expansive phenomenon (Engeström, 1987) and can be studied within and across multiple places and spaces (Córdova, 2008; Gutiérrez, Larson, Enciso, & Ryan, 2007) as texts that are both written and read (Bloome & Bailey, 1992; Córdova, 2008; Floriani, 1993).

Thus, orienting ourselves from this theoretical perspective we can account for the social construction of a professional learning community culture — its spoken and written texts and belief systems — and understand learning as a process and consequence of participatory membership. Ethnography typically refers to research that describes and interprets patterns of human actions and activity that make up the culture of a population in society or within a social system (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). This interpretation of data has situated ethnography on the side of subjectivity and qualitative research. Zaharlick (1992) described the utilization of ethnography in anthropology and its value for education:

Ethnography can allow for a better understanding of the sociocultural contexts within which teaching and learning occur and what factors may be supporting or constraining learning in various learning environments. Ethnography can allow for the exploration of the relationships among teachers, students, support staff, parents, policymakers, and others within and outside the school. (p. 122)

The Piasa Bluffs Writing Project leadership developed a participatory view of ethnographic research so they could serve as participant ethnographers and site-directors who facilitate professional learning during the institute. In this way, the codirectors were *members* of the institute along with Amanda and Malinda as *researchers*. This state of in-betweenness allowed us to grapple with how the institute's daily planned experiences needed to be revised by what actually happened in order to further build upon the insights and awareness that participants were developing. This ethnographic language, therefore, oriented us as we *learned to see learning* (Yeager, Floriani & Green, 1998) within the institute, and now, it allows us to see the ways that fellows continue their learning after the institute — this time within the cultural landscapes of their classrooms.

In the subsequent graduate inquiry class, Amanda and Malinda became coethnographic researchers with the codirectors. In Amanda's opening reflection, she clarified the value of learning to ask questions, she invited the codirectors and participating K–12 teachers into a deeper sense of knowing. She further argued why developing an inquiring stance to practice matters:

We are teaching each other how to ask questions. We are learning how not to save each other but to help each other think more deeply about our questions. Instead of having an answer given to us, we have to search

for the answer. And once found, we see and feel the answer in a way that can be lived in our practice. Rather than a way that is “textbook” and calculated. It is so much easier to slap a quick fix band-aid on a question, but then what? The what is what we are asking ourselves daily. When we get together, we share our whats in hope that we see the “so what.”

It was through our blog that we maintained our individual voices as we build an inquiry community.

But how did our site manifest itself as such to create a thriving teacher inquiry community? Transformations take time, commitment, and incredible effort. Our PB-TIC community explored thus far in this piece is but a slice in the life of a new site. How did this view that inquiry stances matter become a privileged way of acting and being for our site? Who was involved? How was it coconstructed and talked into being? These questions are important to pursue in order to reveal the ways in which the work of PB-TIC came into being. In order to address these questions, we must cast our gaze even farther back into our site’s history. We examine the histories, experiences, and practices of our site in order to understand how the PB-TIC came into existence and, more importantly, how it nurtures the development of inquiring stances. We document and study a series of consequential progressions to trace and examine the *roots* and *routes* of inquiring stances and how these stances grew upward and outward in the present work of our fellows. We reveal the seemingly invisible ways inquiry practices were first formulated in order to understand how they consequentially progressed and reformulated (Vygotsky, 1978) as our PB-TIC continuity program. We now look across four telling cases (Mitchell, 1984) in our site’s history: 1. The development of shared visions, 2. The conceptualization of a writing project as a transformational space, 3. The application process and pre-institute day, and 4. The ISI as a space for formulating and reformulating potentials for inquiry as the heart of professional development.

### **Histories Cannot be Ignored: From Peripheral to Shared Conceptual Visions**

Piasa Bluffs Writing Project is contextualized by the antecedent history of an earlier writing project, which thrived from 1982 until 1995. Jeffrey Hudson, PBWP’s school-based codirector participated in that former site, and his knowledge of NWP principles enriched the genesis of PBWP. Through our work, it became visible that Jeffrey’s father, Don Hudson, was a codirector of a writing project site in Wisconsin. Ralph Córdova, PBWP site-director, was a member since 1995 of his own writing project site in California. The convergence of writing project knowledges between the two codirectors cannot be ignored as influential in how we imagined resurrecting a writing project community in our service area. Specifically, Don’s work in Wisconsin is remembered on Nature Reading and Writing Workshop and for his definition of culture:

That which protects us by identifying what is harmful, dangerous, and in control of our lives is called *culture*. Culture sticks to us, that is we carry around its trappings, its symbols, and its imperatives. Culture is always changing, sometimes for the good and sometimes not — therefore, its definition is not stable. Humans are always using culture, but they are victimized by it also. (Hudson, 1993)

Don's definition can help us think about the professional development culture, which existed in our university's service area as our writing project gestated and major legislation impacted the field of education and teachers.

In January 2002, the federal *No Child Left Behind* bill was signed into law. Educators recognized this new legislation as, if not harmful and dangerous, certainly pushing us to not be in control of our professional lives. An isolating and acidic professional development culture evolved in our service area. The pressures to perform on the battery of tests that came with the new accountability legislation spawned a swarm of experts with armloads of practical strategies and programs that swoop in to "save" beleaguered schools and teachers. The message continually reinforced here is the idea that teachers lack aptitude and capability, and that belies a culture-driven view of an absence of faith in teachers as professionals. The trend of de-skilling through reactionary programs and strategies worked to characterize teachers as unable to teach or learners to learn during the two decades leading to the turn of the century (Smith, 1986). As directors thinking about the reincarnation of the writing project at our institution, we knew we had to explicitly coconstruct, or coauthor, a new culture of learning — one of intellectual curiosity and action — rather than merely *reflect* the existing one that had isolated and devalued teachers. The catalyst for creating the culture of our site was teacher-inquiry.

### **The Roots and Routes of Intentionality: Conceptualizing a Writing Project as a Transformational Space**

The mechanism driving the "teachers teaching teachers" model is the teaching demonstration. During the ISI, teachers share with colleagues a slice of their practice through a 70-minute event. Demonstrations are grounded in a theoretical perspective that guides the presenter's practice. For our site, this reflective nature of our demonstrations set spark to potent fuel, burning deep within both our fellows and us, the directors, generating almost nuclear energy now radiating out from our site and allowing us to scale-up, to nurture inquiry, and allow it to ripple out into our service area.

We believe that without framing the teaching demonstrations as inquiries into practice, there is a risk of those demonstrations becoming "show-off" commercials with animated Powerpoints and simply practical strategies to take back to your classroom tomorrow. The act of grappling with the process of examining our practices and preparing a presentation

that highlights successes and nagging wonderings allowed for individual inquiries that radiated towards shared inquiries among all participants in the institute. Because we planned our institute to become a space for inquiring to emerge within and between us, to develop inquiring stances. (Cochran-Smith, 2001) to our profession, we began to identify the glimmer of re-forming our teaching practice and the beliefs that guide them.

Inquiry empowers teachers. Our philosophy on this point has been shaped by Paulo Freire (1993) who wrote,

I cannot think *for others* or *without others*, nor can others think for *me*. Even if the people's thinking is superstitious or naïve, it is only as they rethink their assumptions that they can change. Producing and acting upon their own ideas — not consuming those of others — must constitute that process. (p. 89)

Achieving such an inquiry stance, however, is neither easy nor entirely safe. Asking questions of our practice and testing our assumptions means becoming vulnerable and exposed, building a culture of authentic accountability.

Together, extending the collaborative critical reflection during our face-to-face meetings we extend our learning through our PB-TIC blog where we post our inquiries into our practice and provide critical feedback to others' postings, helping each other uncover and identify those issues that matter to us. We then unfold our learning experiences into meaningful practice, moving our graduate study beyond the completion of assignments to meaningful cocreation of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development. In doing so, we make visible and available to each other professional knowledge and make it possible to re-evaluate our own beliefs and change when necessary for effective engagement of students in learning. Our site believes that when we engage in these practices, we are teaching each other how to resist a flawed accountability movement and how to elevate the work we do as powerful and intellectual work — professional perspectives that will not tolerate disrespect that "canned" local professional development models constitute.

In place of a culture of quick fixes and programmatic instruction that had evolved in our service area, we are moving toward a more humane, Freirian space for problem-posing and inquiry. Daniel Quinn's metaphor on this point is useful. Programs, he argues, are like sticks poked into a stream bed; there aren't enough sticks to change the flow — to change the culture (Quinn, 1997). Therefore, we have come to see ourselves as participatory reformers in a larger movement that invites teachers to share of their most private selves and to reach for those unspoken wishes; we grow professionally by helping each other reach and question. We collectively contribute to assembling a presence that shifts and reroutes the direction of that stream.

Although the current stance toward professional development and teacher knowledge may be seen as hostile and squelching, we must remember and understand that this view didn't occur overnight. We understand it occurred slowly across a local professional landscape whose professional development offerings became mired in a belief that knowledge is transmitted — and that knowledge is a message — a one-size-fits-all approach for teachers and students who are not all one size (Córdova, 2008). Because what counts as professional development for local teachers was shaped over time by all parties involved, we recognize its constructed nature. Therefore, we must study it, in order to deconstruct and reshape it, guided by a belief system that all teachers, like all students, deserve high-quality professional learning opportunities where they come to own their learning. And these opportunities make way, with little steps toward schools becoming spaces where teachers [and students] lead intellectual lives (Harwayne, 2001).

### **Formulating Inquiring Stances: The Application and Preinstitute Orientation Processes**

Beginning with the application process, we coached fellows to take up an inquiry stance toward practice. We received more than 40 applications for only 16 spots (a fact that reveals a real thirst for something more from professional development in our service area), and all 40 of these prospective fellows were asked to think and write about a strategy they use to teach writing. We asked fellows to think about *why* they used particular strategies and what concerns they have in applying these strategies. From the outset, we positioned ourselves as a community of noticers leading us to become theorizers. We put ourselves at the epicenter, teachers teaching teachers.

Through the application and interview process for selecting teachers for the 2008 summer institute, 16 teachers revealed themselves to be ready to begin the work of establishing a community of inquiry into practice to begin creating something new. A preinstitute day in May allowed us as directors to put into place certain rituals and routines to nurture our emerging culture and evolving philosophies. There was food, of course. Never underestimate the motivating power of coffee and donuts or a catered lunch. We wrote, all of us, and shared that writing. And we experienced a teaching demo. This demonstration was more than just a model for fellows to consider or imitate. It was genuine inquiry. As writers ourselves, we have come to believe in and trust two tools: collaboration and revision. We have also noticed in teaching writing how resistant students can be toward revision. They'll say, "Awww, you mean I gotta write it again?"

We front-loaded the demonstration on revision with questions aimed at these beliefs and observations: What is the relationship between collaboration and revision? Why do students resist revising their work? What are some ways to foster collaboration and revision in the classroom? With the demonstration thus framed, we looked at writing we had all done in preparation for the day. We shared that writing providing feedback using a given protocol,



then debriefed the entire process, and came back to those questions with which we started. During this debriefing, fellows nominated each other, spontaneously, to share their narratives, "Jackie should read hers. It's amazing!" Kathy had her partner in tears. Certainly the goal of his model was not to get folks to cry, but it does highlight the power that comes from valuing teachers (and our students) as knowers, as writers. This initial meeting of fellows began the rooting process as we all slowly dug into the sustaining life force of shared inquiries.

### **When There's Room to Grow: Invitational Summer Institute as Inquiry-in-Action**

PBWP convened its first ISI in a basement classroom of Founders Hall on our university campus. This ISI represented a resurrection of sorts, a reincarnation of the former writing project that had dissolved in the mid-1990s. Both writing projects conducted their institutes in this same building, perhaps even this same classroom — green/gold close-cropped carpet, comfortable chairs with a pneumatic system to adjust for height, six or seven tables, no windows. Dried and crumbling corkboards, left mostly untouched, served as backdrop for the work we would do.

New to the room, though, were 16 amazing teachers immersed in the process of creating a new professional culture for themselves, a culture we want to remain vital and evolving as it ripples back into the schools with our emerging PBWP fellows. Among the rituals and routines of this emerging culture was the Scribe/Ethnographer of the Day (SEOD). Each day one fellow volunteered to be a participant/observer of the day's events. This ethnographer captured these events, filtered through his/her own lens of assumptions and philosophies, in a narrative read at the start of each morning. One convention that emerged in these narratives was the embedding of wonderings. We interrogated the highlights and assumptions, delights and disappointments of the previous day. In this way, we assumed a figurative stance, which allowed us to look back in order to shape our movement forward. Below is a wondering from Patti's notes. She links the day's events that she recorded, which had focused on coconstructing knowledge with students and the content, to her own question linked to her own practice.

I have a completely different style of teaching in my Oral Communications class than when I teach my English III class. How can I shift my frame of reference to my English III class, which allows for discussing with students rather than teaching materials to my students?  
(Patti Swank, Scribe of the Day Notes, Day 15, June 30, 2008)

We see an internalized implicated future action to modify her practice as precipitated by reflecting upon the previous day's events. Further facilitated by the act of recording the institute's history, we see a collective effort authoring our institute's narrative — an inclusive narrative that allows for each to add and take away what is needed to grow.

Our first group of fellows was forming community quickly and powerfully. We, as directors, sensed this, but the degree to which it was happening was placed in sharp relief for us the second day of the institute. During a transitional moment in the day's agenda, when returning from lunch, fellows demanded some transparency on our part. They began asking questions about the writing project — how did it come to be, how did we directors meet and start working together, and (the real question they were driving at) how did they get selected to be the first fellows of the Midwestern Writing Project? The “why me” tone of their questions was striking. The question was coated in the residue of past experiences. Within the writing project by its second day they saw their experience and expertise valued and for the first time they were treated as professionals whose knowledges are precious natural resources. They began to see themselves as active participants in the process of educating, not mere purveyors of curriculum. Patti Swank later tells her impression of this point in our history as “somehow I knew there was something very special about to happen — from the interview process up until this very moment, my natural resources were SEEN. Key — SEEN — recognized, acknowledged, heard, honored.”

The best teachers and writers, from our experience, all possess a reflective stone of doubt, a little voice always wondering — is this piece of writing any good, am I really helping my students become better writers? This quality is responsible for making them good writers and teachers, but it is also a quality many have learned to suppress, that many feel reveals weakness. Why me? our fellows wondered. Who am I to have this opportunity? And what happens if they find out I am not really good enough? “Along with a sense of shame for not having already mastered everything in the world of teaching (as if anyone truly can — but did I know that? Uh, no),” Patti later added.

We all feel it when we stand in front of our students or colleagues and are expected to say something, to teach. It is this quality, this stone of doubt from which teacher-inquiry draws its power and potential. Rather than ignore that voice and pretend to know it all or feed it and become paralyzed by doubt and insecurity, teacher-inquiry generates new knowledge. And when that process happens in a supportive community, the results are transformative.

### **Where to Now? Holding Each Other Up and Growing Steadily, Deeply**

“[B]ureaucracy,” wrote Theodore Sizer (1992), “depends on the specific, the measurable. Large, complex units need simple ways of describing themselves, so those aspects of schoolkeeping which can be readily quantified often become the only forms of representation” (p. 207). Sizer’s fictional teacher, Horace Smith, compromises himself to the point of burnout acquiescing to this bureaucracy. Such a bureaucratic hierarchy casts teachers as founts of a standards-aligned, teacher-proof curriculum. And Sizer was

writing pre-NCLB. The stakes have become higher, bureaucracies complex, and teachers ever more isolated (Sizer, 1992).

We believe that teacher-inquiry offers teachers like Horace a lifeline. Teacher-inquiry repositions teachers, redefines them as *creators* of knowledge, not mere messengers, deliverers of knowledge. In the following excerpted exchanges from our PB-TIC blog, we experience the ebb and flow, give and take, that is the consequence of being members of this kind of professional learning community. We read and experience how members coconstruct new possibilities from their current realities, grounding insights in their wonderings and implicating future professional action. Being uprooted and gently transplanted into a framework, where a community encourages speaking one's truth and sharing, results in the exponential explosion of energy mentioned earlier. Within this transplant emerges the life-changing, transformational language of inquiry.

Kathy, a kindergarten teacher, and 2009 ISI fellow makes a reference to a book's title she had seen at Mindi's house during our previous PB-TIC meeting. She is also referring to an earlier posting by Mindi who wonders what qualities we ought to have as teachers in order to make a difference. Here, Kathy hypothesizes if some of the social problems she and other teachers are experiencing may be related to fewer recess minutes during the day due to the focus on standardized testing preparation.

I still am concerned and troubled about a number of things — not the least of which is the title of (and actually the contents) of a book that Mindi had on her dining room table at our last meeting — what the hell happened to recess??? (Really the title is just “What happened to recess and why are our children struggling in kindergarten?” but hell just popped into my mind — I guess that was church's influence this morning?...But what did happen to recess especially in kindergarten or just play time??? “We no longer have time for that” — is what I am being told, not so much in spoken terms but in mandates by politicians and then by administration.... but then I think about the problems we are having with behaviors and a lack of getting along with others and I think that maybe, just maybe, killing those things has just added to our problems. Just my thoughts on this cold morning. (Comment by Kathy L — February 22, 2009 @ 5:14 p.m.)

Ralph then makes a reference to that earlier comment that Mindi made. He then links Kathy's recess hypothesis to Mindi's wonderings in order to ask if this notion of recess as a space for learning and exploring, and lack thereof, can be applied to us as teachers.

You know Mindi, you boiled down into one paragraph all that keeps me going. LOL (laugh out loud) ... you are as obsessed as we all are to examine what we do and make sure we focus our efforts on making our

classrooms where students grow and become amazing people. I think this TIC group would describe those characteristics as what good teachers do.

But do those characteristic describe our colleagues in our buildings who have other reasons for teaching? Are they “good teachers” too?

I think I become a better teacher when I’m around you all and other colleagues who share. And when they share of themselves, their struggles, successes, and how they figured things out, I see the potential for my own growth in them; and thus I’m inspired...

Yeah ... and to extend the notion of recess and apply it to our professional selves ... what the hell happened to our own professional learning? Schools have taken away time/spaces that support healthy socializing, play, wondering, curiosity, trying new things ... not just from the little ones, but from us big ones too.

I think there’s a link between the two. (Comment by Ralph — February 22, 2009 @ 8:42 p.m.)

Renee then draws on the unfolding narrative. She grounds Ralph’s notion of “recess” and links it to the ISI where learning was exploring and “a kind of play.” She theorized that the mere idea that teachers could explore, experience, wonder, and struggle together to develop insights that inform professional learning, indeed, is a kind of “play.”

The excitement that Mindi has for each day and hopes that her students have seems to be related to the idea of recess and “play.” Not that the older kids like Mindi’s students have much of a recess, nor do the younger ones, as Kathy points out, but still, it seems that what we want, at least in part, for our students is for them to play with thoughts and ideas — to roll them or throw them around in their minds, talk about them, better yet, laugh about them as they internalize those ideas and interact with them. I can’t imagine a better day than one in which my students were having so much fun with the information that they were playing with it. As I read this over I think that maybe I’m not expressing it right, but when I think of some of the best “lessons” we learned this summer in our institute or even the best lessons I ever learned, the learning was a kind of play with thought — it was fun. It doesn’t get any better than that. It is sad to see that time for discovery taken away from us and from our students. Who is going to want to learn — or teach — if there’s never any time for fun? And just for fun — here’s a link to a bunch of quotes about

play as learning. I was going to pick one or two to share, but I couldn't narrow it down! (Renee February 22, 2009 @ 10:53 p.m.)

The interaction among these writers suggests the coconstruction of a new narrative — an inclusive one that our writing project has begun to manifest that is present in all layers and spheres of its work. Through the act of writing, from posting individual perspectives that implicate references to a shared past of the ISI where formulated perspectives were developed, members continue to make sense of their thinking through writing, helping each other to grow. Sharing membership in our PBWP community is one kind of space. The implicated spheres of their respective classrooms is a second kind of physical space. Together, the interaction among these two spaces allows for members to construct a third space for themselves. This third space is the PB-TIC where each continues to navigate the complex physical, social, and political cultural landscapes of our multiple institutions.

As we look ahead, we recognize the shifts in perspectives that have occurred over time. What becomes challenging, as in all ethnographic research, is the tension between documenting them and conceptualizing their significance to the life of the group. We believe that the multiple individual shifts in perspective are shaped by the cultural beliefs and practices of our writing project. In turn these shifts in perspective shape what our writing project is and the professional role it can serve to meet our fellows' needs.

The power of ethnographic inquiry, wrote Stephen North, “derives from its ability to keep one imaginative universe bumping into another,” (1987, p. 284). Teachers negotiate a variety of “universes” — classrooms, lounges, meeting space, universities, and communities. They are uniquely positioned to witness what happens when these universes bump into each other. Our site's Teacher Inquiry Community (PB-TIC) has opened space to study these encounters. North goes on to describe the sequence of ethnographic inquiry. Step two, according to North is “entering the setting” (187, p. 284) teachers are already in. Teachers as ethnographers (Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, 1992a & b) can nuance the powerful inquiry stance that allows us to begin seeing the work we do as teacher-researchers. It allows us to see how we and our students coconstruct the kinds of learning communities that enable us all to learn.

When Amanda writes, “We are teaching each other how to ask questions,” she is moving us deeper into ethnographic inquiry. Teachers not engaged in inquiry may be asking questions of limited scope and value. These questions are theatre designed to teach and entrench hierarchies (Hudson, 2008). When teachers as interactive, ethnographic researchers learn to view their classrooms and learning settings as cultural landscapes for learning (Córdova, 2008), they begin to harness the agency they do have to help shape unimaginable places where all are welcome.

Although our site is young, because our history is steeped in inquiry across all levels, we are already surfacing important questions to guide our growth. For example,

how are new teachers supported? How do we invite principals into the conversation to see teachers as their most valuable resource? How do we help each other resist the normalizing and isolating force of bureaucratic hierarchy?

As I sit here writing, I can't stop thinking and reflecting back on these last three quarters, which have unbelievably flown by. I told my principal the other day that when I wake up in the morning, my mind is automatically focused on my students and what the day will bring. Will they learn? Will they be bored?...I think about it as I close my eyes for the night. Is that what it's like for all teachers? Or just good teachers? If we aren't constantly thinking about what we can do to enable our students to become better learners, thinkers, problem solvers, and just good human beings, then I think it's probably time to find a new profession. But I know our group is right where we are supposed to be. And just knowing that is so refreshing. (Mindi, Middle School Teacher, Winter 2009)

So have you wondered what the unknown consequences are for a site's concerted effort to bring inquiry to the heart of its work? We did and continue to do so. When our efforts are cast from the springboard of collective wisdom — wisdom that comes from a deep belief that teachers are deep knowers of their work and of their worlds — we can begin to account for the ripples that emerge from the work of a few caring professionals. Writing this piece has allowed us the pleasure of slowing down time to carefully interrogate, characterize, and now hold onto our site's young life by sharing our challenges and successes. In doing so, we see the rich legacy that it is in the process of establishing that will envelop, nurture, and support all those who join our community of inquirers.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See the introduction to this special themed issue for a brief history of the National Writing Project, State Networks, individual writing project sites, Invitational Summer Institute, and Continuity Programs. Piasa Bluffs, a new site, is contextualized by this history. It is also important to note here that there was a writing project in this university in the past, but it went fallow in the mid-1990s.

<sup>2</sup>PBWP's leadership comprises diverse and multiple codirectors. Patti, as well as other people referred to in this article, codirects the writing project's programs and development.

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