4-2019

Knotworking the College, Career, and Community Writers Program

Rachel Bear
National Writing Project, rbear@nwp.org

Tom Fox
National Writing Project, tfox@nwp.org

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm

Part of the Rhetoric and Composition Commons, Secondary Education Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation

Knotworking the College, Career, and Community Writers Program: A Retrospective

RACHEL BEAR AND TOM FOX

The College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP) began in 2012 as an Investing in Innovation grant from the U.S. Department of Education. This grant brought intensive professional development in argument writing to 44 rural, economically poor districts over three years. The success of the first grant prompted the National Writing Project (NWP) to use what we learned to design a series of new grants through a different Department of Education program, Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED). Over 100 local Writing Project sites, well over one-half of the NWP national network, have received grants to support C3WP advanced institutes and professional development in high-need schools. These include rural and urban contexts. Finally, in 2016, NWP received a new Investing in Innovation grant to scale up C3WP to add professional development for teachers in grades 4-6 and expand the program to new sites and new states. The evidence of C3WP's power to transform classrooms ranges from articulate descriptions by district teachers and NWP teacher-leaders of students making powerful changes in their communities to a randomized control trial showing clear gains in student writing.

This summary of the trajectory of C3WP traces a smooth line of development, as if Step A led easily and automatically to the subsequent steps. To counter that narrative and bring us all down to earth, we would like to go back in history and examine the tensions, conflicts, worries, and uncertainties that accompanied the development of C3WP. We will call these challenges "knots," and the term to work in these complex contexts "knotworking." This term was introduced to literacy studies by Yrjö Engeström and colleagues to refer to the work that involves "The continual tying and untying of genres, objects, texts, and people" (Fraiberg, 2010, p. 105). Knots are complex problems involving multiple and often conflicting concepts, people, traditions or institutions. All educational reform occurs in spaces where there are conflicting forces: families and their concerns, teachers' concerns, district concerns, state and national initiatives, proposals from nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and more. Those stakeholders are themselves embedded in cultural and political movements, historical trends in education, in both the broad sweep of history and yesterday's events. C3WP was no different. We have identified four "knots" that we think are important to explore: the role of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), the creation and framing of the instructional materials in C3WP, the responsivity of C3WP to the extraordinary political decline of respectful public discourse in the last decade, and the emergence of powerful student action.

Knot #1: The Common Core State Standards

The year is 2012. The Common Core, proposed in 2010, has taken hold, and all but two states have signed on. In the first iteration of C3WP (then called the College-Ready Writers Program, which echoed language of the CCSS), NWP planned to work in Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Tennessee. All of those states signed on. Though the CCSS document was far from perfect, compared to NCLB-era state standards, writing was both visible and valued by the standards, returning writing to the national conversation. Among administrators and teachers, anxiety surfaced around the emphasis on nonfiction reading and argumentative and informational writing. C3WP sought to work with English Language Arts teachers on writing to meet the Common Core standards, supporting them as they transitioned to a curriculum that emphasized nonfiction and argument writing more than in previous years. Despite the lack of universal

affection for the CCSS, the standards included writing and provided us with an opening for grant proposals and productive work in schools. In the knotworking metaphor, we worked the standards to support what we knew was good writing instruction, even though other parts of the CCSS, such as its simplistic stair-step model of education, were less attractive (Nordquist, 2017, p. 71).

A year later, working this knot became even more complicated. Shortly after we started the program, the Common Core received a new nickname, "ObamaCore," and one by one, beginning with Oklahoma and Alabama, many of the states we were working in rescinded their adoption. Mostly, states rewrote standards that resembled the Common Core, but clearly our strategy of working directly with CCSS had to be rethought. In retrospect, while we were at first confused and perplexed by the opposition to the standards, which were replaced by very similar standards, it may have been helpful to us to focus solely on the value of argument writing for students and not measure its value against a set of national standards. Fox remembers a specific meeting with teachers in the border city of Bisbee, Arizona. He was pitching C3WP, its alignment with the CCSS, and its value as college preparation. One of the teachers there simply said, "That won't sell here. Many of our students aren't interested in college, and while we would want everyone to have that choice, some students will not buy that reasoning." What was persuasive for teachers was the value of helping students write arguments to improve their lives and imagine new possibilities for themselves, including college, but not exclusively so.

It's a lesson that the National Writing Project knows well: Listen to what teachers say about their students. While some administrators worried about the new standards, teachers worried about their students. The shape of argument that C3WP promotes emerged in dialogues with teachers who believe their students needed greater access to public life, needed to develop thoughtful and respectful practices in argument writing, and needed a trajectory of consistent instruction over the course of students' years in school. The details of this trajectory emerged over time.

Knot #2: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Instructional Materials

Ironically, then, the rejection of the CCSS by many of the states we were working in allowed the full ambition of argument writing in C3WP to bloom. A skeleton of the argumentative content of C3WP emerged early. Joye Alberts, then Site Development Director for NWP, and Fox were on

a site visit in 2013. Fox handed Alberts a copy of Joe Harris's *Rewriting* and read where Harris describes his book's aim:

to show how to do things with texts, to shift our talk about writing away from the fixed and static language of thesis and structure and toward a more dynamic vocabulary of action, gesture, and response. You *move* in tandem or in response to others, as part of a game or dance or performance or conversation—sometimes toward a goal and sometimes just to keep the ball in play or the talk going, sometimes to win and sometimes to contribute to the work of a group. I hope in this book to describe intellectual writing as such a fluid and social activity and to offer you some strategies, some moves as a writer. (pp. 3-4)

The idea that writers are actors, making moves, connected with the best ideas about students and about arguments. With this general framework, NWP set out to do what we often do when kicking off a program. We created a national leadership team, wrote a Request for Proposals (RFP) for local sites, and held an introductory meeting. The first RFP simply listed the goals of the grant:

- Improve middle and high school teachers' practice in the teaching of academic writing;
- Improve middle and high school student academic writing achievement; and
- Increase the number of rural teacher-leaders in participating schools and districts.

Then the RFP asked sites to describe their capacity to address the CCSS, and to describe what they knew about the districts they proposed to work with. That summer, to support the content of the program, we created a meeting with sessions that showcased approaches to teaching argument, which included everything from Hillocks to Toulmin to Aristotle. Sites and district teachers attended these approaches to argument sessions as if they were at a professional conference.

Honestly, NWP staff and our national leadership team felt like something was "off" about the meeting, and we worried about whether or not sites were ready to jump into professional development a mere two months later. As local Writing Projects began their professional development that fall, we recognized two related problems. The first was that writing instruction had been lost in many of the schools. Since NCLB's concentration on reading and math, writing had simply dropped out of the curriculum. This problem was compounded by the extreme economic poverty of the schools, where even staffing the classes with teachers was a stretch: Many schools hired Teach for America volunteers to

teach entire grade levels and used long-term substitutes without teaching credentials to fill staffing gaps. For these teachers, there would not have been a place in their career path where they would have learned to teach writing, let alone argument writing, so it was no surprise that not much writing instruction was going on.

At the same time, local site leaders worried that *they* might not know enough about argument writing to help the teachers. Some were reliving traumatic freshman comp experiences; some were hesitant to wade into argument writing because they enjoyed and felt more confident in other genres of writing. The result was that in the first half-year of the grant, students were not doing much argument writing at all.

So, in early 2014, at an informal breakfast table at an airport hotel, Fox, Alberts, Bear, and our leadership team decided that everyone needed a place to start. What we then called "the mini-unit" was born; our idea was to create easy-to-use materials to give site leaders some materials to share with teachers that would get students started writing argument. The first materials included a "Writing into the Day" sequence, layering of texts to arrive at a claim (now called "Writing and Revising Claims"), and "Connecting Evidence to Claims." The response was mixed among the local Writing Project leaders, with some feeling like this move felt very "un-NWP." Their response was understandable because curriculum had been the way that teachers had been controlled and contained in the NCLB era. Were we doing that? How could we support sites and district teachers without assuming the role of the banker, depositing argument curriculum in teachers' empty heads, to use Paulo Freire's well-known banking education metaphor? How would we support teacher agency when, in the historical moment, giving teachers instructional materials was a tool to reduce their agency?

What the C3WP leadership imagined was not a banking deposit. Instead, we hoped the mini-units would be received in the NWP tradition of teacher-inquiry demonstrations in the invitational institutes, where teachers would experience a lesson, understand its purpose, and adapt it to their own practice. The mini-units created by NWP teacher-leaders came straight from their practice, so they were smart, tested, and accessible. Interestingly, Writing Project teacher-leaders were more worried about this issue than the district teachers, who seemed relieved to have something good to teach. What C3WP had to do, regardless, was to work this knot, and represent the instructional materials as designed to foster inquiry and to provide support as they learned principles of effective writing instruction. In our meetings and communications,

we argued against implementing the resources "with fidelity" and for trying them out, adapting them "with integrity" (LeMahieu, 2017). We represented them as "generative structures" designed to support teachers' professional learning. As teacher acceptance grew and our communications about the resources grew more precise, students' enthusiasm emerged, and we quit worrying.

Midway through the first grant, our leadership team created and piloted the Using Sources Tool (UST), the simple-yet-powerful formative assessment tool that is integral to the program. The UST, too, was a small knot. Assessment, even formative assessment, has been co-opted as a surveillance tool over teachers. Above all, we hoped that we could avoid teachers feeling looked over and judged. Instead, the UST, as a *real* tool of formative assessment, gives teachers more agency. The information from the tool results in choice, including decisions about next steps for classrooms and for individual students. Additionally, the benefit of collaboratively examining student work with common language supports departmental or school-side dialogue about writing.

The current set of resources grew incrementally as teachers and site leaders dialogued with the leadership team about what would be helpful, what was missing, and what other resources would support teachers. Each additional resource emerged in response to an observation of student work. At one meeting, for instance, after examining a great deal of student work, one site leader observed that students had successfully selected evidence that connected to their claims, but the evidence seem randomly ordered. Two resources, "Ranking Evidence" and "Organizing Evidence" were created to target this specific skill. The current slate is likely to continue changing as we adjust to new expectations of students, new cultural contexts, and new cohorts of teachers.

Knot #3: Public Discourse and the Politics of C3WP

A 2012 Pew Research Center survey confirmed what every news-reading person already knew, which was that hyperpartisan politics had become the norm in public discourse and the divisions between liberal and conservative had calcified. Americans were watching news that confirmed their opinions, with conservatives watching Fox News, and liberals watching CNN, ABC, NBC, and MSNBC and listening to NPR. These divisions were reflected in congressional stalemates, government shutdowns, and legislation for political purposes only. Facebook and other social media devolved into "echo chambers" where one's views were supported and

confirmed. In other words, adult role models of argument reflected a world where public argumentative discourse moved in the opposite direction of C3WP (Pew, 2012). In 2016 and 2017, Pew found that partisan divisions had grown even wider (Pew, 2016; Pew, 2017).

Outside of NWP, other organizations' attempts to support teachers' implementation of new standards, for the most part, seemed more likely to support the "win-at-all-costs" version of argument. Materials that emerged from state departments of education were not promising. They reached back to Ancient Greece and a reductive version of classical rhetoric to the triad of ethos, pathos, and logos, with one hilarious (sort of) state department message that got it slightly wrong by advising teachers (with a lovely triangle) to encourage their students to use logos, pathos, and *ergos* as they write arguments. Many others simply reproduced the never-say-die five paragraph theme that asked students to make a claim, find three pieces of supporting evidence, and then conclude. Our version of argument required students to read, think, read some more, think some more, and somewhere in that process create a tentative claim. What's more, with resources such as "Curating to Counter" and "Coming to Terms with Opposing Viewpoints," we asked students to *respect* opposing viewpoints. The C3WP program, and the teachers and students we worked with, faced a hurricane of acrimonious discourse about hugely important public issues.

The knot between hewing to a political view that blamed one side for the acrimony and aligned our program discourse to the principles of the materials was indeed a knot. But there has always been a "knot" around what's come to be known as critical pedagogy, a concern about being "political" in the classroom. On one hand, students benefit from learning about oppression, racism, sexism, and the systems that keep power in place. On the other hand, indoctrination in and of itself seems like a regressive idea. C3WP's political move in the second decade of the 21st century required nuance and knotworking. First, throughout our funded programs, C3WP has focused on teachers and students in the poorest schools in the nation. Both the i3 grants and the SEED grants focused on under-resourced schools. The goal of our argument pedagogy—the self-selected researched arguments and civic arguments at the end of the resource guide—is for students to make informed arguments about public concerns that they identify. The hoped-for consequence is that students, especially those in our nation's poorest communities, will participate more fully in public spaces and change their communities for the better. Our insistence on multiple points of view in the text sets is based on two beliefs: 1) Stu-

dents with agency from these communities will argue better and more generously knowing the various points of view on an issue, thereby helping them join conversations that they may have previously been excluded from; and 2) while all the readings may not support a social justice position, some of them do, exposing students to views that they may not have experienced. The political power of C3WP lies in the assumption that when students engage multiple points of view on a topic, slow down, listen more carefully, understand a range of voices, and come to a thoughtful position, they lead us to more respectful, more efficacious public discourse.

Knot #4: The Students Lead the Way

Throughout the various iterations of C3WP, even during struggles with the uptake of the program, there has been one constant: Students enjoy it, take it up, and run with it. Teachers often struggle with some of the terminology from Joe Harris or what a "nuanced claim" is, but when asked, "how are the students doing?" the answer is almost always, "they love it."

After seeing the powerful impact of the Using Sources Tool, the leadership team developed a student version of the tool for use in the classroom. Designed to support student ownership over their writing and learning, the tool can be used for peer feedback or self-assessment. The Student UST invites students in as partners in formative assessment and provides a shared language that reinforces key elements of their source-based arguments. Like other aspects of C3WP, students enthusiastically take up the Student UST, engaging in lively and thoughtful discussions about their own writing and the writing of their peers. The Student UST helps students make deliberate choices and planning for next steps in revision. As one student put it, "with [the Student Using Sources Tool], you can do it yourself and take your time. And then see for yourself what could you do better. Instead of having someone else tell you what you could do better."

Certainly, students' achievements are impressive. Take a look at the following proposal that a student wrote to a local foundation. Notice the effects of C3WP, Maryssa's skill in using sources. But notice more importantly Maryssa's agency. This high school junior from a small, rural community believes she has the right, and perhaps even the responsibility, to write such an argument:

My name is Maryssa Rodriguez, a junior attending Yreka High School. I participate in my school's Health Regional Occupation Program and am vice president of my chapter's Health Occupations Students of America club. Needless to say, I am interested in a career in the medi-

cal field after secondary school. For my senior project, I have decided to work with the Siskiyou County Department of Public Health to get a mobile health clinic up and running in our outlying communities. This clinic would be very beneficial to our county's population in many different ways.

   According to researcher Venkat Srinivasan, an estimated 1,500 to 2,000 of America's clinics are on wheels. They get about 5 million to 6 million patient visits a year. That sounds like a large number, but it's less than 1 percent of all patient visits. Mobile clinics have the ability to reach communities that do not have easy access to decent health care… (Rodriguez, 2018)

This grew from her year-long exploration of argument writing and was the result of the "Making Civic Arguments" resource. The amazing result is this:

The Foundation agreed to buy the Mobile Unit and to fund its staffing.

   Students all over the country are making consequential changes in their communities as a result of their participation in C3WP, arguing successfully for funded ambulance routes to rural areas, suicide prevention programs in schools, new community libraries, improved opioid clinics, and more. Such success could only occur in classrooms where teachers have learned that students can really change the world, and can do it with the power of informed argumentation. As we look ahead, new knots will certainly emerge, old knots will need reworking. C3WP's continued relevance to students and teachers depends on sustaining the co-creation and revision of resources and teaching practices. By doing so, we uphold and enact a central NWP value of mobilizing the knowledges that teachers create from their practice.

References

Engeström, Y., Engeström, R., & Vähääho, T. (1999). When the center does not hold: The importance of knotworking. In S. Chaiklin, M. Hedegaard, & J. Uffe (Eds.), *Activity Theory and Social Practice: Cultural-Historical Approaches* (pp. 345–74). Aarhus: Aarhus UP.

Freire, P. (2007). *Pedagogy of the oppressed, 30th anniversary edition.* New York: Continuum.

Fraiberg, S. (2010). Composition 2.0: Towards a multilingual, multimodal framework. *College Composition and Communication*, 62(1), 100–126.

Harris, J. (2006). *Rewriting: how to do things with texts.* Logan UT: Utah State University Press.

LeMahieu, P. (2017). Why education needs more integrity (and less fidelity) of implementation. Retrieved from *Carnegiefoundation.org.* carnegiefoundation.org/newsroom/improvement-voices/what-were-reading-paul-lemahieus-what-we-need-in-education-is-more-integrity-and-less-fidelity-of-implementation

Nordquist, B. (2017). *Literacy and mobility: Complexity, uncertainty, and agency at the nexus of high school and college.* New York: Routledge.

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (2012). Partisan polarization surges in Bush, Obama years [PDF].Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/legacy-pdf/06-04-12-Values-Release.pdf

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (2016). Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016. Retrieved from http://www.people-press.org/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016/

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. (2017). The Partisan Divide Grows Even Wider. Retrieved from http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/

Rodriguez, M. (2018). Improving healthcare access in Siskiyou county [essay].

Rachel Bear is Senior Program Associate for the National Writing Project and Program Co-Director of the College, Career, and Community Writers Program.

Tom Fox is Director, Site Development for the National Writing Project and Program Director of the College, Career, and Community Writers Program.