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## Unscripted Possibilities

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*Promising Practices Article*

## **Unscripted Possibilities: The National Writing Project's College, Career, and Community Writers Program in Rural High-Need Schools**

**Tom Fox  
Rachel Bear**

*“Unscripted Possibilities” examines the potential for change that emerges in rural environments affected by poverty and educational reforms that ignore the specific contexts of rural schools. Using a National Writing Project program, the College, Career, and Community Writers Program, as a case, we argue that professional development relationships that are characterized by mutuality and indeterminacy create changes in teacher practice and school culture. Our analysis adapts concepts from Anna Tsing’s (2015) *The Mushroom at the End of the World* to uncover hopeful possibilities in damaged school environments.*

From 2012-2015, the National Writing Project (NWP) supported a large, multi-state rural professional development program in teaching argument writing: the College, Career, and Community Writers Program (C3WP). The success of the program was measured quantitatively by our independent evaluators and showed clear gains in the quality of student argument writing. This article takes another look at our success by examining the role of NWP’s professional development model in rural districts, districts that have been differentially affected by educational reforms that ignore the needs of rural students. Our analysis demonstrates how success was achieved in challenging contexts by focusing on teacher-led professional development made possible by NWP’s networked structure of local writing project sites. To examine both the contexts and the professional development relationships, we borrow three concepts, *precarity, scaling, and collaboration*, from Anna Tsing’s (2015) *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life After Capitalism*. Tsing’s book may seem like an idiosyncratic choice to frame an article about professional development in writing instruction. Yet her book speaks to the experiences of this program in ways that help articulate the particular character, tenor, and quality of the professional learning relationships that add analytical depth to the success of NWP’s professional development practice in rural contexts.

The program was funded by a U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3) grant. NWP’s success was remarkable considering the range of the program over 44 districts whose only common features were that they were rural, landing

them on one of two federal lists: the Small Rural School Achievement Program or the Rural Education Achievement Program, and they were high need, meaning that over 50% of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Some districts were nearly all white, some were nearly all African American, some were nearly all Latinx. Some were large, consolidated county-wide districts, some were tiny schools with one English teacher. Some districts had a teacher turnover rate of 75%; others had staff that had been there for years. Administrators came and went with regularity. The districts were located in the Southeast, Southwest, Midwest, and Northeast. Despite these vast differences, these districts had two common features. First, they were underfunded to the extent that it affected staffing, professional development, and curricular resources. Second, they felt enormous pressure to perform well on state tests in a policy context of shifting standards, priorities, and assessments, pressures that differentially affect rural districts (LaValley, 2018).

NWP’s 2012 i3 proposal took advantage of the opportunities created by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which highlighted argument writing as an emphasis and “special case” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010, pp. 24-25). While the alignment with CCSS no doubt helped NWP be chosen as an awardee of this grant, that alignment was less successful on the ground. Soon after the program’s work began, the 49-state endorsement of these standards quickly disintegrated state after state, beginning with rural states, dropping the standards in a federal backlash. “ObamaCore” became the standards’ pejorative nickname.

Though the standards certainly created a context for the proposal, NWP’s goal was never to create a program that would simply meet the standards. NWP enthusiastically approaches argument writing in such a way that argument writing develops learning, deepens appreciation for multiple perspectives on an issue or topic, and supports rural students’ desire to be active and responsible participants in civic and academic life. The ultimate goal is for students to choose their own issues, research a continuum of points of view, construct an argument using evidence from nonfiction texts, and use that argument to participate in educational, civic and political communities. Given the challenges of rural, economically poor, diverse districts and these high expectations for achievement, the success of the program is all the more intriguing.

NWP had similarly ambitious goals for the overall design of the program. C3WP is made up of three intertwined parts: intensive and embedded teacher-to-teacher professional development, a set of instructional resources that provide teachers with opportunities to select the resources that best fit the needs of their students as they develop argument skills, and a variety of formative assessment tools that support teachers in collaboratively analyzing student writing to identify next instructional steps. This design provided a shared understanding of argument writing and shared principles of professional development, but encouraged adaptation by local Writing Project sites to meet the needs of the unique rural contexts they were working in.

C3WP’s success was measured in a variety of ways. Independent researchers from SRI International conducted a randomized control trial

(RCT), collecting timed student writing from treatment and control districts, and found positive statistically significant differences in four criteria of argument writing. SRI authors Gallagher, Woodworth, and Arshan (2015) summarize the results:

This evaluation of teacher professional development is one of the largest and most rigorous to find evidence of an impact on student academic outcomes. It found that C[3]WP affected student outcomes on a particularly complex task—writing an argument supported by reasoning and developed through the use of evidence from source material. (p. 1)

Additionally, an independent qualitative team from Inverness Research conducted interviews, observed national meetings, and also deemed the program successful, focusing on the following features of the program:

We suggest that two features—the program’s stance toward local teachers and the design of the professional learning opportunities—worked together . . . to contribute to classroom implementation and the positive results. A third feature—the support of local teachers to grow as professionals—not only supported implementation but also helped extend the life and the reach of the new practices. (Stokes, Heenan, Houghton, Ramage, & St. John, 2017a, p. 9)

Additional articles examine C3WP from a variety of points of view: “For the Sake of Argument: An Approach to Teaching Evidence-Based Writing,” by Friedrich, Bear, and Fox (2018), looks at the success

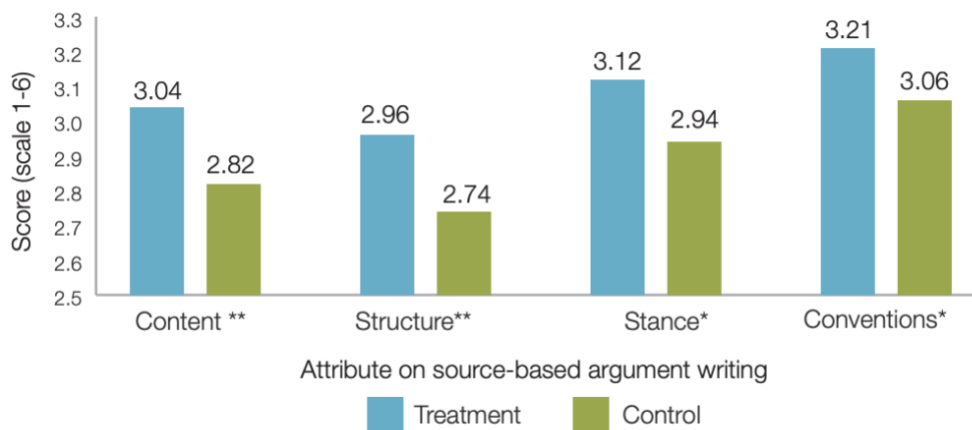


Figure 1: Results from the C3WP Program (Gallagher, Woodworth, & Arshan, 2015, p. 3)

of the overall program in more detail for a general audience. “Knotworking the College, Career, and Community Writers Program” (Fox and Bear, 2018) examines the tensions and growth of the project in the first two years. Gallagher, Arshan, and Woodworth (2017) provide a more in-depth discussion of the results for a research audience.

NWP received around \$16 million in funding for the program, distributed over five years. The majority of the funding for the program went to the universities that hosted the 12 local Writing Projects that participated in the program. NWP’s program served 44 rural districts, 10 states, roughly 400 teachers, and 25,000 students. The design of enlisting local writing projects in rural areas to do the professional development is in line with one of the key recommendations included in “Leading Education Innovations in Rural Schools: Reflections from i3 Grantees” (Fox et al., 2017), which highlights the importance of leveraging or establishing “regional infrastructures (e.g., regional training centers, regional staff) to support implementation, build capacity, ensure integrity of the innovation, and adapt innovation to local context and need” (Fox et al., 2017, p. 16). NWP’s networked structure allowed us to reach vastly diverse geographic regions with local Writing Projects that had familiarity and knowledge of the districts, creating local-to-local relationships with our district partners. Local Writing Projects chose teacher-leaders with rural school experiences to lead the professional development, which supported teacher-to-teacher relationships that transformed teacher practice and improved student argument writing.

### *The Mushroom at the End of the World*

In our look into NWP’s professional development, we focus on the qualities and characteristics of the encounters between NWP teacher-leaders facilitating the professional development and the rural district teachers who met them halfway. These encounters occurred in an era of jarring, disruptive, seemingly endless waves of educational reform, most often done *to* teachers, not even *with* teachers, and certainly not *by* teachers. They occurred at a time when ever-merging publishing houses shaped and standardized curricula, textbooks, and assessments. These products, created to work in any region of the country, often imagined

students as living anywhere and nowhere, ignoring the specific contexts of rural America.

Tsing’s book begins with a chapter called, “The Arts of Noticing,” where she focuses her “noticing” on disturbed landscapes and simultaneous attention to “promise and ruin” that emerges in these landscapes (p. 18). Tsing analyzes the relationship between the matsutake mushroom and the ecological and cultural contexts in which it grows and is harvested. It turns out that this valuable mushroom grows in the ruin of clear-cut ponderosa pines. Tsing carefully examines the relationship between the “ruin” of the environment and the “promise” within it for the mushroom and other organisms. The larger argument that emerges from Tsing’s study of the mushroom is what to do—how to live together—in environments that are disturbed. Tsing convincingly documents how environments become disturbed through capitalist practices. However, she focuses on the aftermath: what new relationships, new collaborations, new assemblages emerge. Similarly, in this article, we document how these particular rural districts have become “disturbed,” but our focus is on the emergence of the professional learning relationships between NWP’s local teacher-leaders and the district teachers. Our understandings were greatly assisted by a national leadership team that gathered information from their work on the ground, shared it in monthly meetings, by national meetings with the districts and local writing projects, by site visits, and by thoughtfully written reports from teacher-leaders.

In looking carefully at the rural districts that participated in C3WP, they were located in districts and communities that were, in their own ways, “disturbed environments.” We want to make clear that by describing these districts as “disturbed” we are pointedly *not* describing the teachers, students, and administrators as the problem. Our encounters with district personnel, including students, was overwhelmingly positive. The description of district context as “disturbed” is meant to show how rural districts are often systematically hampered by policies through no fault of their own. Moreover, despite being hampered by policies that differentially affect rural education, districts often manage to meet many of these challenges through the heroic commitment of educators to the success and well-being of their students. On NWP’s part, these environments required arts of noticing, self-reflexive alertness to people, rural contexts, and the assets and needs, promises and ruins, of rural communities. In

Tsing's book, this noticing is attuned to specific relationships among, for example, a mushroom and a tree growing in a human-altered environment.

Three concepts from Tsing's hopeful study of the mushroom in the midst of environmental disturbance shine a light on the professional development relationships that emerged during our work: 1) a recognition of the persistent and structural inequality of rural schools that results in *precarity*; 2) an understanding and analysis of how *scaling* has disturbed writing instruction in rural education; and 3) attention to *collaborative* relationships that emerged between NWP and the rural districts.

The encounters between NWP leaders and rural district teachers occurred in wildly diverse rural contexts: in beloved communities, in schools where students greet you and say "welcome," in communities where industries have left and adults are adrift, and where, in all cases, the tax base inadequately funds education. LaValley (2018) uses the phrase "deep poverty" to refer to "situations where the child's family income falls below half of the poverty line" and notes that 13% of rural children live in such circumstances (p. 4). These children, and their teachers as their witnesses, experience life on the edge of ruin. This backdrop powerfully shaped the character and the quality of the encounter between NWP's professional development and rural districts.

### **Concept # 1: Precarity and Teachers' Practice in Teaching Argument Writing**

As the professional development in the high-need districts began, the stunning economic poverty of the schools became apparent. The National Writing Project selected these districts because of their high-need status based on free- and reduced-lunch percentages (averaging approximately  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the student population). We borrow a term from labor studies, *precarity*, which was first brought into use by Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker Movement. The term is employed by Tsing (2015) and others in contemporary discussions of complex systems. Tsing defines precarity in the passage below:

Precarity is the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on stable structures of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remakes us as well as our others. We can't rely on the status quo;

everything is in flux, including our ability to survive. Thinking through precarity changes social analysis. A precarious world is a world without teleology. Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible. (p. 20)

Precarity refers to an ongoing state of uncertainty, a semi-permanent unpredictability of employment, subsistence, and existence, and currently often refers to postindustrial use of temporary and contingent labor. Precarity also describes institutions like the districts and schools NWP worked with. These schools were "vulnerable" to state mandates and tests that did not work in their favor and to economic downturns and budget crises that cause instability in both the teaching and administrative staffs. Nationally, local taxes, on average, provide 45% of school funding, the majority coming from property taxes (Reschovsky, 2017, p. 29). Local property in rural, economically poor communities, such as the ones NWP worked with, is typically valued lower than in urban and suburban communities, which results in systemic, ongoing financial precarity. The effects of structural inequality of funding markedly affected these schools and their capacity to offer high-quality writing instruction in the following ways:

- The teaching force in these districts was highly unstable, with an overall yearly turnover rate of 30% and with rates as high as 75% in some districts.
- In many cases, school funding was so low that retaining credentialed staff was impossible in some places, leaving schools to hire volunteers regularly (sometimes staffing an entire grade-level with volunteers), hire alternatively credentialed teachers, and use temporary employment services to hire substitutes.
- Providing high-quality professional development was difficult for the districts due to the small size of the school and the added cost of travel due to the districts' geographical isolation.

The specific consequences of this economic poverty for the NWP's program were that: 1) because of the alternative to or absence of teacher credentialing, district teachers had little undergraduate education in teaching, often none in teaching writing; 2) because of the lack of funding of the schools and slates of urgencies occasioned by state tests and mandates,

teachers had little or no sustained professional development in writing instruction that would compensate for this lack of preparation.

We want to make clear that the challenges experienced by these districts had nothing to do with any individual teacher or administrator. Indeed, we admired their professionalism and dedication to students' success. Precarity isn't an accidental state; it's a consequence of structural inequality, reforms driven by profit, and unsustainable labor practices. Precarity occurs in classes (of people or institutions) that are unprotected, and unfortunately, the rural districts that NWP worked with were challenged by a significant lack of economic resources. Jennifer Ringo, an NWP teacher-leader in this program, describes the experience of precarity in one of our rural schools:

Regular turnover in administration and faculty—"teacher churn"—adds to a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability, so [NWP teacher-leaders] must be prepared for a variety of potential roadblocks. In just one year, we experienced major teacher turnover, a district mandate to teach one standard at a time, planned meetings with no attendees due to district miscommunication, odd scheduling (reading and English in separate class periods), a sudden 1:1 initiative (through an Apple grant), a newly elected superintendent in January, reliance on test-prep, and excessive benchmark testing. (Ringo, 2014)

Because of the lack of adequate funding, the rural districts in NWP's program lived and worked in contexts of constant upheaval where disruptions of staff, curriculum, administrators, rosters, and schedules were the norm, a part of the hanging on, a part of daily survival. The mercurial nature of these districts required NWP teacher leaders to be alert, attuned, adaptive to the steady stream of change.

### **Concept #2: Precision-Nested Scaling and Curriculum**

Scalability is, indeed, a triumph of precision design, not just in computers but in business, development, the "conquest" of nature, and, more generally, world making. It is a form of design that has a long history of dividing winners and losers. Yet it disguises such divisions by blocking our ability to notice the heterogeneity of the world; by its design, scalability allows us

to see only uniform blocks, ready for further expansion. (Tsing, 2012, p. 505)

As the professional development continued, another challenge became apparent: School reform had pushed writing instruction out of the curriculum entirely in many of the schools. This was the result of reforms initiated by No Child Left Behind, the national law guiding federal educational policies from 2001-2015 under both Republican and Democratic administrations that asked states to create rigorous standards and testing regimes that would ensure that every child is 100% proficient. NCLB's reform played into the hands of for-profit testing and textbook companies whose entrepreneurial practice is what Anna Tsing (2012) calls "precision-nested scaling" (p. 505), where the practices and products developed in one location (in this case in urban centers) are moved without transformation to another location (rural districts).

For-profit companies like Harcourt or Pearson developed both textbooks and tests that were virtually the same for Los Angeles and for Berryville, Arkansas, for Chicago and East Tallahatchie, Mississippi. Precision-nested scaling requires "alienation," that is, students and teachers need to be decontextualized, and even the practice of teaching needs to be lifted from the cultures and customs of communities—alienated—so that the textbooks were imagined to work anywhere with any student and any teacher. This practice produced huge profits for these corporations because one product, one textbook, or one standardized test could be sold in many states with only minor changes. For instance, Pearson's profits jumped 175% in the years following the adoption of NCLB (Davis, n.d.). Because writing is notoriously difficult to assess with standardized tests, states did not invest in writing assessments that looked at authentic student writing. Instead, states opted for standardized multiple-choice exams, resulting in an emphasis on reading and math. The urgency of this point is that standardized products—textbooks, curricula—are designed to sell to the largest number of districts, which are found in more densely populated urban and suburban centers. NWP's local-to-local, teacher-to-teacher counteracts the alienating qualities of scaling.

NCLB's emphasis on testing and curriculum differentially damaged rural schools. In her 2018 report, LaValley describes many of the common reform efforts emerging from NCLB as "at best, difficult, or at worst, impossible for rural communities to implement" (p. 23). She argues that

post-NCLB reforms continue to privilege metropolitan concerns. Reforms such as charter schools and school choice “lift theory directly from the urban classroom and apply it directly to the rural setting with no accommodation” (p. 23), which aptly summarizes the negative effects of precision-nested scaling on rural students.

Reforms driven by standardized products deeply affect teachers in rural schools. Chea Patton’s story in the edited collection, *Literacy Teaching and Learning in Rural Communities*, describes the result on morale for teachers. She writes, “when state-mandated high-stakes testing replaces the journey of learning, teachers like me become demoralized and we question if what we’re doing is indeed teaching, let alone worthwhile” (Eckert & Alsup, 2015, p. 69). These “feelings of demoralization,” as the editors of the collection call them, are evidence of the decontextualization and alienation of precision-nested scaling that has created “standardized assessments and policies that often affect small, rural districts, with few faculty, and even fewer resources, in exaggerated ways” (Eckert & Alsup, 2015, p. xvi).

Everything our profession has learned about work in rural schools is that context is powerful. The C3WP, our i3 grant, was conducted on the “ruin” of writing instruction caused by devastating poverty of the schools and by national and state policies that erased writing instruction from the curriculum. Private corporations’ precision-nested scaling design for textbooks, curriculum, and standardized tests hijacked any potential benefit of NCLB, which—depending how suspicious you are—was either by design or a consequence of the rapacity of the industry.

Indeed, there was very little student writing going on in the districts. While NWP rejoiced in district teachers’ expertise in their schools, their students, their communities, and their commitment to excellent instruction, NWP could not count on their expertise about writing instruction. To counter the effects of precision-nested scaling, a small leadership team of rural NWP teacher-leaders created resources that provided inexperienced teachers of writing a series of accessible entry points into argument writing for them to try out and respond to.

We distinguish these resources from a *curriculum* because of the role that the standardized or scripted sense that “curriculum” has acquired. Precision-nested products have diminished teacher agency and ignored the unique contexts of rural communities. In contrast, C3WP instructional

resources consist of a series of argument writing practices throughout the year: support for routine informal argument writing; a series of small, focused units that ascend in sophistication from developing claims to extended, researched arguments driven by student choice and community issues. Each resource reflects a set of design principles that articulate the program’s approach to teaching argument writing. The idea is that by teaching the resources, teachers will experience high-quality, teacher-designed pedagogy and be supported to reflect on the design principles that shape the resources. Thus, they will be able to adapt the principles for their context, and ultimately, to create their own resources.

Following LeMahieu (2011) we call these instructional resources “generative structures,” inviting teachers to adapt and adjust them to meet the needs of their students and rural communities. For example, most of the instructional resources include sets of nonfiction texts representing a range of perspectives on an issue that people are talking about in the world. Teachers are invited to use these text sets or to swap them out for ones that are directly aligned to topics they are teaching or that are more relevant to current issues in rural communities. Later resources provide opportunities for students to engage in self-selected topics with a focus on community engagement. In this way, the resources lend themselves to “place-conscious education,” which “begins with students’ real civic efficacy in their local place and extends outward into inquiry and citizenship in wider communities” (Brooke, 2003, p. 7).

Moreover, the resources are not designed to stand alone. As we mentioned above, C3WP is made up of three key components: instructional resources, formative assessment tools, and professional development. Teachers, in collaboration with their Writing Project colleagues as part of C3WP professional development, design their own path through the resources based on what they identify as next instructional steps for their students. This selection is guided by C3WP’s formative assessment tools that support teachers in analyzing student writing as part of professional development, specifically naming what students can do already and what they are on the verge of learning. As local Writing Projects implement the program, NWP emphasizes “integrity of implementation” rather than “fidelity of implementation,” giving sites the freedom to plan professional development “in a manner that remains true to essential empirically-warranted ideas

while being responsive to varied conditions and contexts” (LeMaheiu, 2011). In order to not repeat what precision-nested scaling has done to teachers, local writing projects offer professional development that aligns with the program design principles and adapts to meet the needs of the unique rural contexts of the district. This frame of “integrity of implementation” is then passed on to NWP teacher-leaders as they work with teachers to adapt the program in the unique contexts of their individual classrooms. The indeterminacy that accompanies these adaptations was accommodated by NWP’s networked design in that each local Writing Project works autonomously with each rural district. NWP’s sense of integrity of implementation means that the ultimate goal of providing these instructional materials is *not* for teachers to just teach the materials, but to go deeper and learn the principles of the resources’ design.

An experienced district teacher describes the interactive, responsive nature of conversations she engaged in as part of C3WP professional development:

To just have an open exchange of ideas has allowed me to grow so much as a teacher, and for somebody who has been teaching as long as I have to be able to do that is a gift . . . I have shared it with others . . . every time we meet, hardly a week goes by where we don’t have one or two or three ideas about how to improve what we are doing, and so it is the culture that we have created, and you don’t ever reach the end, and you are just developing more and better ways to do what we want to do. (Stokes et al., 2017a, p. 18)

The agency reflected in the collective pronoun, and her description of a *created* school culture demonstrates a newfound agency (“do what we want to do”) and a comfort with ever-expanding learning in the absence of predetermined outcomes.

### **Concept #3: Collaboration as Contamination**

In order to survive, we need help, and help is always the service of another . . . If survival always involves others, it is also necessarily subject to the indeterminacy of self-and-other transformations. (Tsing, 2015, p. 29)

In this section we focus on the relationship between NWP’s local writing project leaders and the district teacher in rural districts, describing actions that counter the effects of scaling and ameliorate the

negative effects of education reform. We highlight the adaptations of the program and unexpected developments that emerge. Collaboration, in the sense we will use it, means engaging in work without knowing the exact outcome. Unlike precision-nested scaling projects, engaging in collaborative work in rural schools characterized by precarity means the outcome is always yet to be decided.

One of Tsing’s strengths as a writer and scholar is her ability to reverse a valence on a concept. As we have seen with “ruin” or “disturbance,” Tsing nudges their meanings away from simply a negative state or event. Instead, they signal a change, a place where something not known will happen in its wake. In a similar fashion, Tsing pairs collaboration with “contamination” (Tsing, 2015, pp. 27-34). By doing so, she shifts the sense of collaboration away from “group work” toward something more complex, away from a predetermined process and toward an alertness to unanticipated possibilities. When Tsing writes about contamination, the word captures the sense of unintentional influence and the indeterminacy referenced in the above quotation.

The concept of collaboration as contamination helps define the professional learning that the National Writing Project’s networked structure promotes. Out of disturbed educational landscapes, new transformative relationships can form. We are used to seeing schools as “cultures” or “ecologies,” words that attempt to capture the complexities of relationships that exist there. Tsing’s 2015 book argues that in disturbed environments or ecologies (and there are hardly any places on earth that are undisturbed) new assemblages, collaborations, or contaminations emerge, and that noticing them, understanding them, and paying attention to them makes visible possibilities, “multiple futures” (p. viii), that are key to our survival.

The collaboration central to the National Writing Project network takes place between the local writing project teacher-leaders who facilitate the professional development and the district teachers, the scaled-down place where the work happens, where one system (NWP) meets another (rural districts). While NWP’s professional development often occurs in workshops or whole-staff work, an innovation that counters the isolation rural teachers experience is NWP’s emphasis on teacher/teacher-leader dyads, called “thinking partners.” Thinking partners focus on teachers as co-learners, co-planners, co-teachers, and co-laborers. NWP teacher leaders work alongside district teachers exchanging and extending



knowledge. If we reverse the solely negative valence of contamination, then we notice new possibilities.

Robin Atwood, an NWP teacher-leader and guest on an NWP webinar, describes this kind of professional development as

improvisational artistry. There's a science and then there's a real art. It's like a dance. Smith County [their district] is like Rosenblatt's theory: *The Reader, the Text and the Dance*. This whole situation is like a text we're reading. Smith County is a text. And it's a situation. It's not a set situation. We have to make meaning with that text and it's like a dance. (National Writing Project, 2013)

Notice that Atwood is challenged to find the exact language or analogy to describe her role. This is because it's not the typical way of doing professional development; the notion of a negotiation that doesn't have a concrete outcome is difficult to capture. In all of her examples, however, she is illustrating the idea that "it's not a set situation." Atwood recognizes the indeterminacy of the work, calling it "improvisational artistry." There is no set outcome predetermined by either the professional development leaders or the district teachers, but rather ever-shifting outcomes based on negotiation between the professional development leaders and the teachers. In this way, professional development can lead to "self-and-other transformations" (Tsing, p.29), transformations of the writing project leaders, the districts, and the district teachers. Atwood's focus on indeterminacy identifies the potential, but not the certainty, of productive relationships emerging from disturbed landscapes.

Conceiving of collaboration as contamination allows us to deepen our description of the relationship between NWP teacher-leaders and district teachers and makes possible to notice transformations in our work that extend beyond the goals of the grant, the unanticipated outcomes. John, a teacher in a rural school in Northern California, describes the relationship with NWP teacher leaders in friendly, familiar terms:

[Our district] is a very rural school so we really don't have access to people easily. . . . It's nice to see a professional showing us or modeling a lesson rather than just giving us materials and telling us what to do. That's probably my favorite part of the PD. And then the fact that it's like you're part of a team everybody we're all friends. It's like we've known each other our whole lives even though it's only been a couple of years. I appreciate all the help and support.

It's nothing like any other PD I've been a part of. (Fox & Truttman 2019)

Just to name the obvious: it's unusual for a teacher to describe a PD provider as someone they have known "our whole lives." Such familiar language discloses a depth and comfort in the professional relationship, one that counters the more common insider/outsider experience in rural settings. Instead, John feels agency in the relationship and notes that "it's like you're part of a team." These are the kinds of collaborations that can emerge in environments or institutions that are disturbed.

When John goes on to describe changes at his school, they exceed any particular goals of C3WP. He describes an unexpected transformation of his school culture as a consequence of changes that NWP initiated through C3WP's emphasis on respectful discourse in argument writing:

The biggest impact that I think C3WP has made at our school is probably socially. The students . . . learn through this program that they need to be respectful of each other. And so they establish all these rules for communication in their groups. And then we give them somewhat heated topics to discuss and they have to figure out how to communicate effectively and politely.

And frequently they will go out the door still arguing whatever the point is they want to get across to their friends and they will carry it into other classes and other teachers have to tell them to stop to get on with their lesson . . . . That has started to spill over into lunchtime and recess and other places where you'll be outside the classroom and you'll hear them say, "You know you need to say that differently. You shouldn't be talking to so and so like that." And it's rolling over into their everyday conversations.

I realized that after a year of this that our suspension rate has gone down massively and the number of detentions we were writing had gone down massively. It completely changed the culture of our school and how students treat each other. (Fox and Truttman, 2019)

Teachers' experience working in schools characterized by alienation and precarity paradoxically created urgency and desire—a receptivity to a different way of working, an openness to collaboration as contamination. Teachers described a change, an understanding, that the NWP teacher-leaders were there to work collaboratively with them with a shared purpose:

The two [NWP teacher-leaders] that came out and worked with me, that was a great thing and knowing that I wasn't in this all by myself because they were there to help. The fact that I had people to go to and that people came to me, I think that was the key... (Stokes et al., 2017a, p. 13)

For district teachers, the result of these relationships was the ability to imagine—and enact—futures for themselves and their students that signaled significant change not only in instruction, but in the degree to which they valued their practice and agency in their professional abilities.

The responsive, unplanned openness of these collaborations goes both ways and is also reflected in the learning of the NWP teacher-leaders as well. In the most successful collaborations, NWP teacher-leaders taught C3WP resources in their own classrooms and engaged in analyzing their student writing alongside teachers in the district. This created opportunities for even more adaptive collaborations as teacher-leaders and district teachers learned from the experiences of all their students in both their contexts. This is how one NWP teacher-leader described her own learning as a result of being a thinking partner for a district teacher:

I feel like now I have all the language I need to be able to explain to anyone, any administrator, any teacher about the importance of argument writing and what it will do for their students, how it will give them the thinking and writing they need, that's so important...I just have it [in] my bones now, I could answer anything about it, and I have such a passion for it, I want to see it happening everywhere in our state and I have this belief I can go and make that happen, make those in-service agreements for my site. There is no way I would have that without the C3WP, it has taught me so much more than I ever thought. (Stokes, Heenan, Houghton, Ramage, & St. John, 2017b, pp. 15-16)

As with the district teachers, something unexpected happened in the collaboration, something not in the design, but in the meaningful “happening” of the collaboration.

Though this article examines rural teachers' learning through a grant-funded program, the networked structure of NWP, having a local site nearby, provides participating districts ways to continue the work through contracted professional development. Many districts have done exactly that, including some for multi-year continued work. Some

districts have contracted to extend the argument work to content area teachers, adapting the materials to address the content concerns of teachers of history, social studies, and science. Additionally, thinking partners focused on teachers' deep learning, emphasizing the *principles* underlying C3WP's resources, changing their understanding of how to teach writing, therefore making the changes likely to be long lasting. In addition to the ways C3WP will continue through sites and in individual teachers' classrooms, NWP will be disseminating the program to teachers inside and outside our network. First, we are supporting a team of site leaders in writing about C3WP for publication. Additionally, we are building a Teaching Argument Writing online Community of Practice (CoP). Through this open Community of Practice, members will have access to other teachers interested in teaching argument writing and they can sign up for both free and paid courses that will be developed based on what we have learned about teaching argument writing from C3WP.

Unscripted possibilities might be the subtitle of NWP's practices of professional development. Despite the challenges faced by these and other rural districts, teachers and especially their students have imagined multiple futures for themselves and their communities. NWP's networked design of local sites and the willingness of its teacher-leaders to sit with indeterminacy results in teacher change and student action that cannot be entirely predetermined. Professional development that relies on *arts of noticing* problematizes standardized responses to the unique contexts of rural education. This stance changes the nature of the professional development relationship, as both sides of the encounter are *on notice* to create, develop, customize, and adapt rich practices to most artfully meet the needs of their students and communities. As a result of C3WP, students have successfully changed their communities by arguing to fund ambulance routes, arguing for a foundation to fund a mobile health van, founding a new community library, addressing food scarcity, and more. While C3WP's resources support the development of effective arguments, the greater question of how reasoned and generous arguments can help us live in damaged environments is being answered by students. It is this *noticing* that can help rural teachers remake, redo, reinvent, and repair writing instruction.

## Authors' Note:

This article was drafted before the COVID-19 pandemic and revised and submitted during its height. So much has changed. However, the idea of heightened “noticing” for unexpected potential seems relevant to the current situation. The rapid switch to non-traditional instruction poses significant problems for rural teachers and schools. Often neither teacher

nor student have adequate wi-fi for conferencing and online instruction. State budget crises loom, often (always?) affecting economically poor rural schools the hardest. The precarity of the schools has only increased. The framework for analysis offered in this article is more than a plea to look for silver linings. Instead, we offer the concepts here as a stance, a way to sustain attention to unexpected potentials that may be key to our survival.

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