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Differences that Make a Difference: Adapting a Professional Development Program for the Post-COVID-New-Normal

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Differences that Make a Difference: Adapting a Professional Development Program for the Post-COVID-New-Normal

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Abstract

The unpredictable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented challenges including a need for new curricula, pedagogy, and more accessible forms of professional development (PD). A gap in research exists regarding professional development of educators. This qualitative study used data collected from two surveys, a focus group, and a geographical distribution map. The analysis focuses on identifying factors that influence in-service educators when choosing and participating in an extended, elective PD that focuses on writing and its instruction over two years. Analysis of two online summer National Writing Project institutes revealed several motivators for participation including desires to improve pedagogical skills, online accessibility, and desire to participate in personal writing. Participants indicated a strong desire for the trainings be moved to a later date in the summer and to be offered online. These actionable requests were implemented in the second summer PD offering. Findings will be used to reframe professional development formats.

Introduction

COVID-19 has claimed seven million lives and counting. The uncertain nature of the ongoing global pandemic created unique challenges for educators, indicating that traditional teaching approaches were deficient in a world that made a “rapid shift to digital” instructional delivery (Lockee, 2021). Learning loss caused by pandemic school closures and other COVID-related disruptions requires intensive literacy remediation (Donnelly & Patrinos, 2021; Goldhaber et al., 2022; Kuhfeld et al., 2022, Pier et al., 2021). Classroom teachers will be ultimately responsible for providing the interventions students need to fill in their students’ academic gaps.

This research was instigated by a struggle to engage participants in a voluntary, extended professional development for improving writing instruction through a local affiliate of the National Writing Project. Though educators had applied for a 2022 summer institute and were accepted, on the day of the launch only one showed up. This event started a retrospective review of what changes were needed to engage educators in a summer institute that they needed (they had signed up) but ultimately did not attend. This review was then formalized into a research study when the next year all but two participants engaged in the online format of the same training.

This study looked at the participation and engagement of in-service educators that chose to participate in an

extended summer professional development to improve their writing instruction. The data were used to understand why the educators participated in an extended summer writing institute and questioned the quality of the engagement in the pedagogical learning in an online platform. The following research questions guided this study:

- (1) What are the motives of educators who choose to participate in extended, elective professional development?
- (2) What is the impact of the digital format on the engagement of the educators who participated in the extended, elective professional development?

These questions will be delineated in the methods section of this article.

Teacher Quality

Research shows that teacher quality is a major factor in improving student achievement (Gershenson, 2016; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2012; Lee, 2018). Professional development (PD) programs will continue to be key in supporting in-service teachers as they tackle COVID-era learning loss and the future societal or educational distress that has been increasing in modern classrooms. Considering that the youngest learners affected by COVID (students who were 5 in the spring of 2020) will not exit the K-12 educational system until 2033, the impact of pandemic learning loss will impact instruction for many years.

To improve teacher quality, teachers spend an average of 89 hours each year in PD sessions (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2015) representing about 6% of a typical teaching contract. Because of the rapid changes in schools, providing appropriate development to in-service teachers is even more important now. During the pandemic, the pivot to digital instruction was stressful for teachers for a variety of reasons including unreliable access to the Internet, poor student engagement, and an increase in social-emotional stress (Dos Santos, 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2020), yet an unexpected positive outcome of this rapid shift is the friendly spaces that have opened up for teachers to engage in extended learning (Singh, Singh, & Matthees, 2022), especially during the summer months.

Emerging research has suggested pandemic best practices in a variety of other fields, such as human resources operations (Chanana, 2021), the construction industry (Rayan & El-Adaway, 2021), and the fishing and seafood marketplace (Ruiz-Salmón et al., 2021). However, there exists a gap in research-based evidence focused on best practices in adapting teaching PD related to the changing needs of educators after the pandemic.

A New Normal for Campuses in the Literature

Educators have dealt with elevated levels of trauma due to the pandemic and the necessary rapid progress of digital learning. Consequently, current PD formats of delivery may need to adapt for educators to thrive despite the “end” of COVID. While reimagining an existing PD program designed for in-service teachers, the literature suggests that making changes in the learning environment can make a difference in educator engagement (Reeves, 2021; Moorehouse, 2020).

To date, a significant portion of research on education and the pandemic response examines student-centered

factors such as content reception and the uptake of digital learning tools (Blume et al., 2021; Grewenig et al., 2020; Maity et al., 2020; Osorio-Saez et al., 2021) or the impact of school closures on the mental health and wellbeing of students (Magson et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020; Stamatis et al., 2022; Zaccoletti et al., 2020). This is valuable work, but it leaves out a significant factor in classroom success – the health, well-being, and pedagogical practices of the educators charged with leading classrooms.

Emerging literature on the impact of the pandemic on teacher wellbeing exists. Baker (2021) found that the average teacher in their participant pool experienced seven stressors (out of eighteen stressors tested) in the first months of the pandemic and reported weakened mental health with teachers sharing that they found it difficult to teach while meeting their own needs. Other researchers substantiate these findings with data that indicate a decline in teacher mental health and wellbeing throughout the pandemic and in its earliest “after” days (Cohen-Fraade & Donohue, 2022; Fray et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2022; Lizana et al., 2021; Maricuțoiu et al., 2022; Nabe-Nielsen et al., 2022; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). Kim additionally cited uncertainty, an increased workload, and a negative perception of the profession overall as the three main factors that contributed to the decline of teacher mental health and well-being (Kim et al., 2022).

Writing in the earliest days of the pandemic, Moorhouse (2020) described adaptations made to a face-to-face teacher education course in Hong Kong, including the use of an asynchronous course design with frequent breakout rooms for discussion. Moorhouse noted the emergence of “longer silences and shorter student responses,” (p. 611) a now-familiar feature of virtual classrooms. Additionally, Reeves (2021) suggested using the pandemic to “reshape teacher learning” (p. 44) by replacing the classic 90-minute workshop form of teacher PD with practices that are both longer and more deliberate. He recommended increasing one-on-one and small group coaching support and focusing on what he called “power standards” (p. 48), standards that cross content areas and occur across multiple grade levels.

Post-COVID Professional Development in the Literature

In a small study looking to improve pre-service teacher training in Spain, Fuertes-Camacho (2021) found training in reflective practice (supported by supervision and one-on-one communication) had the biggest impact on teaching and learning. This echoes pre-pandemic findings on the use of teacher reflective practices (Farrell, 2016; Fergusson et al., 2019; Marshall et al., 2017; Rodgers, 2002; Sabagh et al., 2018) and reaffirms seminal work on reflective educational practices (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; Gibbs, 1988).

In a recent study, Anderson (2022) tested the effectiveness of a specific PD model focused on teachers’ creative agency. This study found a reduction in secondary traumatic stress in a study of participants who engaged in creative agency including an increase in “values and beliefs related to creative teaching and learning” (Anderson et al., 2022, Creative Agency, para one). These studies suggested that an online PD system that paired creativity and the arts could help educators during unsettling times while enhancing joy and reducing stress.

In light of the impact of an increased use of technology on both students and teachers, it makes sense to investigate

the optimal delivery of teacher PD. To date, limited scholarship exists into how PD should adapt to the changing needs of teachers. Though most of the literature from the pandemic highlights the struggles of teachers and students, there are two areas of increased success. The first was in the increased pace of the transition to digital resources (Adnan & Adwar, 2020; Serhan, 2020) and the second was the use of virtual activities in classrooms and teacher training (Akojie et al., 2022; Campbell & Shendell, 2023; Chen & Cao 2021; Fabian et al., 2022).

Research on the effects of the pandemic on professional learning in other sectors has called for more work that looks into how continuing education should adapt (Harpin, 2020; Ratten, 2023; Schwab-Reese et al., 2020; Soll et al., 2021; Szopiński & Bachnik, 2022; Wolf, 2023). That research, which includes reports from the healthcare, childcare, and business management fields, makes the existing gap in post-COVID PD research among educators more visible. A study of how a PD program designed for in-service teachers responded to pandemic and post-pandemic pressures will be of value to the field of education.

National Writing Project (NWP) and the Summer Institute Format

This study on educator PD is set in a voluntary, extended summer institute at a northeast Texas affiliate of the National Writing Project (NWP). According to the NWP website, “Every year Writing Project teachers lead programs where teachers across the nation learn how to help youth research and form arguments, expand their learning beyond the classroom walls, and publish their writing about topics that matter to them” (National Writing Project, 2024). Founded in 1974 at University of California, Berkeley, NWP has a history of providing PD and completing research studies on the instruction of K-16 teachers of writing. The flagship PD opportunity for educators is known as the summer institute. Though unique to each site, it generally offers a two to three-week, intensive, summer training at many of the more than 150 national and international sites to regional educators each summer.

Methods

This paper used a naturalistic, qualitative methodology to study what happened when inservice teachers engaged in an NWP Summer Institute for professional development during the summers of 2022 and 2023. The researchers used a generative approach because it allowed increased understanding about best practices relating to PD and the ways inservice teachers volunteered, engaged, and reflected on extended PD.

Context

This study took place at a medium-sized, northeast Texas university in the United States. Data were collected over two years to represent participation in two voluntary summer institutes for a program focused on writing instruction. The Summer 2022 group had eight participants, and the Summer 2023 group had nine. These participants were all in-service educators from either K-12 schools or higher education instructors. Four of the 2024 participants took the summer institute for graduate credit, but the rest of the participants chose to apply to the institute without any incentives. Specific demographic information for the participants is provided in Table 1

(2022) and Table 2 (2023).

Participants

Information about the participants is given in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Participants: Summer 2022 Institute

Demographics	Participants
Career Setting	3 College, 3 Secondary, & 2 Elementary
Race	3 Black, 4 White
Gender	6 Female, 1 Male
Early Career (less than five years)	0

Table 2. Participants: Summer 2023 Institute

Demographics	Participants
Career Setting	3 College, 4 Secondary, & 2 Elementary
Race	1 Asian, 3 Black, 3 Hispanic, 2 White
Gender	8 Female, 1 Male
Early Career (less than five years)	1

Focus Group

Additional data were collected in a focus group that was drawn from the Summer 2023 institute. Four participants were deliberately chosen to represent a cross section of diversity and experience to be in the focus group as evidenced in the demographic information in Table 3.

Table 3. Participants: Post-Summer 2023 Institute Focus Group

Demographics	Participants
Career Setting	1 College, 2 Secondary, & 1 Elementary
Race	2 Black, 1 Hispanic, 1 White
Gender	3 Female, 1 Male
Early Career (less than five years)	1

Research Questions

From the beginning of this study, the researchers looked to identify promising practices for establishing participation in an extended summer PD community composed of in-service teachers. The following research questions guided this study:

- (1) What are the motives of educators who choose to participate in extended, elective professional development?

- (2) What is the impact of the digital format on the engagement of the educators who participated in the extended, elective professional development?

The first question was generated because of a lack of response to professional development opportunities. However, for this study, the researchers wanted to know the characteristics and motivation of educators who voluntarily signed up to participate in these extended professional developments. Identifying these characteristics could improve efforts to reach educators that would benefit from the engagement.

The second question challenged the concept of the quality of online professional development. The researchers sought to analyze the engagement of educators in a digital format to understand the benefits and constraints that exist in online learning.

Single Case Study Methodology

A qualitative single case study approach was used to address the research questions including the incorporation of archival data which include five participant responses to a focused questionnaire sent to the eight participants in the 2022 Summer Institute. The data collected from the 2023 Summer Institute include a revised questionnaire and a focus group with a panel of four volunteer participants. This choice provided the researchers an opportunity to gather baseline data and then follow up with informed questions during a focus group.

Artifacts

In this iteration of the research study we collected the 2022 archived survey responses from the applicants to the summer institute, the 2023 revised survey responses, the dialogue from a focus group made up of 2023 participants, primary researcher reflections, and map data based on the physical location of the study participants during the online institutes.

1. **2022 Archival Survey Responses.** This survey asked participants to identify and rank barriers to participation, asked if an online format would support their participation, and then asked open-ended questions about content relevancy and recommendations for future participants to contact. The barriers listed included: date of the institute: COVID concerns, spikes in gas prices, location of the event, and time commitment.
2. **2023 Survey Responses.** This survey was created for institutional improvement by refining the understanding of the motivations of our participants. This survey asked about the likelihood of participation had the institute been held face-to-face instead of online and for rankings of the supports provided from a list that included: books, library access, virtual format, and flexible independent work time. Then short answer questions asked about content relevance, other teachers we could contact, and if they felt their expertise was valued.
3. **2023 Focus Group Responses.** An outside researcher who had not participated in the institute was recruited to moderate the focus group. The questions asked in the focus group included questions about previous experiences in this specific type of PD and how they initially came to know about this PD

opportunity. Additional questions included their purpose for participating followed by what the outcomes were for them individually. Finally, they were asked about the digital format of the summer institute’s effectiveness, their participation in the community since the institute, and what did not work well during the summer institute. It ended with a request for advice to the directors for future summer institutes.

4. **Researcher Reflections.** The first two authors wrote research memos as they made connections to the research questions after observing the focus group.
5. **Area Maps.** A map was used to plot the addresses of the 2022 participants in comparison to the 2023 participants.

Table 4 provides a breakdown of which participants engaged in each part of the data collection.

Table 4. Participation in Data Collection

	Archival Survey Responses	Revised Survey Responses	Focus Group Responses	Research Memos
2022 Participants	X			
2023 Participants		X	X	
Researchers 1 & 2				X
Area Maps	X	X		

The transcript from the focus group was analyzed by the first and second researchers using three levels of descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009) that connected the research questions to the data set, in which the researchers coded the data by creating labels consisting of a word or phrase. The codes were then reviewed for commonalities and reorganized as needed. The newly revised codes were then used to recode the data again. To increase the reliability of the coding process, the researchers implemented an inter-coder agreement in which codes were cross-checked.

Responses to items one and two, the survey responses, were ranked based on their potential to be a promising practice and helped inform the questions used for the focus group. Revised questions were generated from the data and resubmitted for approval from the Institutional Review Board with two goals: 1). to increase the relevance of the information collected and 2). to assure a strong relationship between the information gathered from the focus group and the responses provided in the survey instruments.

Data Analysis Steps

Following Saldaña’s (2009) three cycle process, the data from this research were collected, analyzed and coded, and then cross-checked for reliability. The analysis began by coding the surveys and the focus group for patterns. To increase inter-rater reliability and align the codes to the purpose of the study, the two coders looked for patterns in response to the two research questions specifically. First, the codes were identified and named as they occurred across the texts. The second coder then checked the codes and added additional named codes. For example, the lack of community in the text was a pattern that was not identified by the less experienced first coder, but its

absence from the pattern was noticed by the more experienced second coder.

At this point the codes were categorized by which question they addressed and then each code was highlighted to provide evidence of the code from the text.

Category: Online Summer Writing Institute

Subcategory 1: The first question: *What are the motives of educators who choose to participate in extended, elective professional development?*

Code: Personal Writing

Code: Course Credit

Code: Pedagogical Growth

Subcategory 2: The second question: *What is the impact of the digital format on the engagement of the educators who participated in the extended, elective professional development?*

Code: Scheduling

Code: Interpersonal Connections

Once the codes were highlighted, the principal investigator reviewed the codes for accuracy and used a double marking system for text that met more than one criterion for a code.

After the codes were categorized and verified, the two coders wrote analytic memos in critical response to the codes identified in the texts. We brought these together for a conversation to critically analyze our choices and approaches as researchers. This is when themes emerged from our data. The themes were tested for connections back to the codes. The codes themselves were reevaluated to assure that the major themes had been identified. The data from the map were held out separately before. Including it now allowed a new theme of *scheduling* to emerge with a code of *geography*.

Once these themes were established, drafts of the themes with the support of the identified codes were distributed to the other researchers in this study. The investigation driven by our research questions was revisited by all of the researchers related to the multiple coded sources. This draft was revised by the researchers to include clearer language and support for the findings of this study.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is the relatively small size of the participant pool. This removes the generalizability of the findings to other settings or contexts. Another is that the study included only Texas-based educators in the United States, most of whom resided in one geographic region of the state, which does not represent the educator population at large.

Results and Discussion

With a clear change in behaviors between the participants that had applied for the summer institute for 2022 and the engagement of the participants during the summer institute of 2023, the research questions were formulated

to identify promising practices for PD that had similar attributes to our summer institute. These questions were:

- (1) What are the motives of educators who choose to participate in extended, elective professional development?
- (2) What is the impact of the digital format on the engagement of the educators who participated in the extended, elective professional development?

2022 Archival Survey Analysis

The National Writing Project of North East Texas offered its first summer institute during the summer of 2022. However, only one of the nine accepted applicants was present on the first day of the institute. This instigated an inquiry as seen in research question #1 into the supports and constraints to educators who participate in voluntary extended professional development in the summer months. Analysis of the surveys of these first participants (see Figure 1) revealed patterns of time constraints and ongoing COVID concerns. Though the data were initially collected for institutional improvement, it was archived as a data set that informed the next data collection. Based on the feedback from the first survey collection, changes were made to the summer institute. It was reimagined as a fully online summer institute to mitigate the time and COVID barriers shared by the Summer 2022 participants.

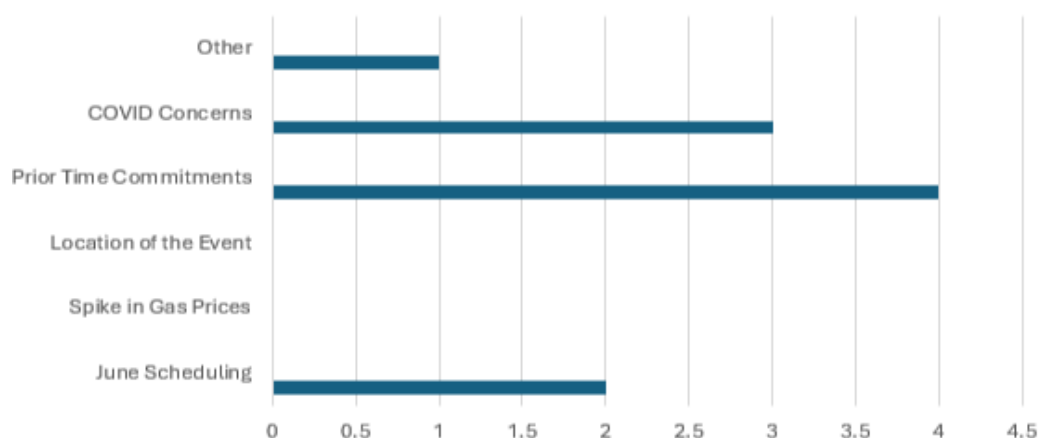


Figure 1. Constraints Identified in the Archival Data Survey

Number of Respondents

The data also revealed how imperative it was to schedule summer PD sessions carefully, with a full appreciation of the full school calendar post-COVID. Teachers no longer stop working after their school year culminates. School districts, particularly in an effort to bridge the COVID gap, had essentially extended the school year into June with summer school offerings. Therefore, an extended elective PD session during the summer required attention to scheduling that would work around this barrier. Teacher participants also shared that targeted incentives can be a major motivator for participation in elective PD. The participants who responded to the survey mentioned that they were looking for incentives such as continuing education credits, free teaching materials, new teaching strategies, updated research on student achievement, and the uses of new technology in the classroom.

Research Question 1: What are the motives of educators who choose to participate in extended, elective

professional development?

Overall, at this point, the data indicated a need for improved scheduling to work around campus summer schedules and a list of financial and pedagogical incentives. Though the schedule could be improved, and the pedagogical skills were available, the financial incentives were a barrier that the researchers were unable to overcome in the planning of the next summer institute.

Research Question 2: What is the impact of the digital format on the engagement of the educators who participated in the extended, elective professional development?

The data from the Archival Data Survey did not address this question directly.

Post-2023 Institute Participant Survey Results

The second summer institute was offered during the summer of 2023 with several key changes. The time frame was moved from June to July to better align with the summer school schedules of the local districts, and the institute was offered online with a schedule that provided a block of time in mid-afternoon to work independently, in small groups, and to care for personal needs and other responsibilities. A second survey instrument was created to collect information about the efficacy of these changes and to obtain more feedback on future summer institute offerings. An analysis of the data collected from the post 2023 survey (see Figure 2) was focused on the context of the 2023 summer institute.

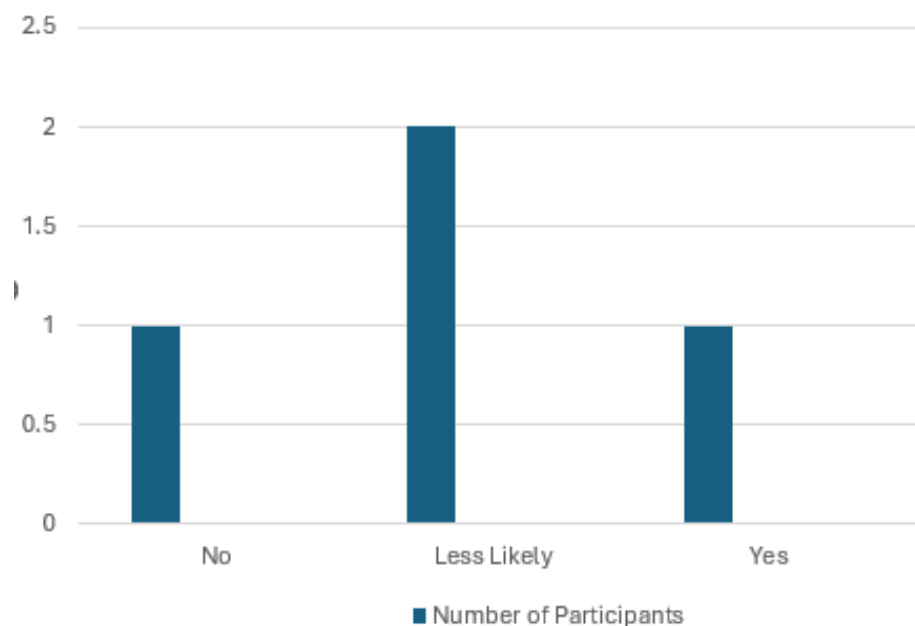


Figure 2. Responses “Would you have attended face-to-face?”

At the time of this survey, mid-summer of 2023, our participants did not reflect any significant change in a desire or preference for meeting face-to-face. However, when asked specifically how likely would they have attended a

face-to-face vs online summer institute, just one respondent indicated a preference for a face-to-face event. The other respondents indicated they would have been less likely to have participated had it been face-to-face. The teachers within this study were eager for more remote learning options. Three of the four (80%) of survey respondents indicated that they would be more likely to participate in a fully online PD session than one with a face-to-face component.

Another question asked respondents to rank the supports that might influence their attendance and participation. Significantly, four participants indicated a fully virtual format supported their ability to participate in the summer institute (see Figure 3).

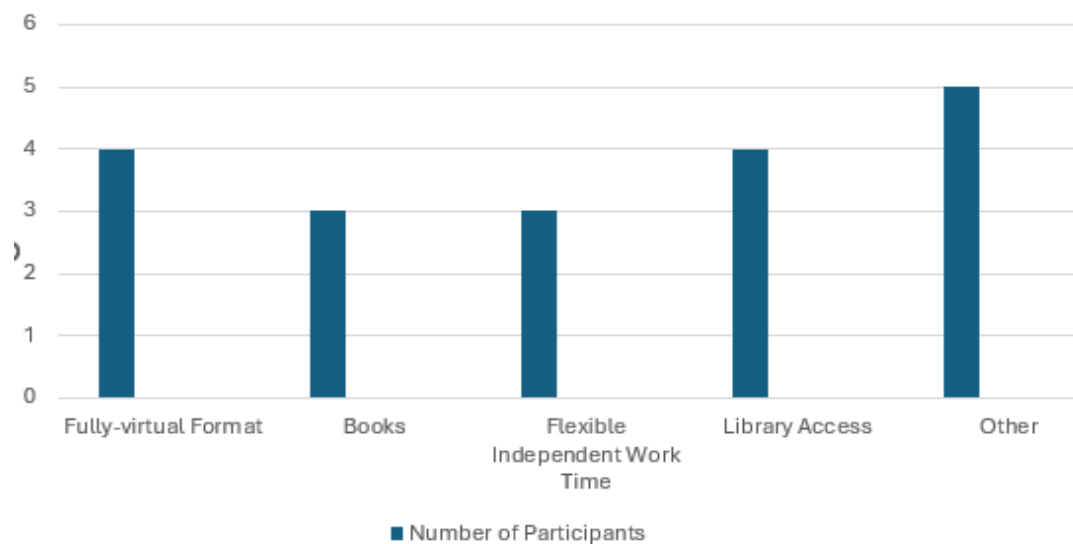


Figure 3. Influence of Supports

An analysis demonstrated a significant difference between the participant responses from the summer of 2022 and the summer of 2023. Within only one calendar year between the completion of the two survey instruments, the 2023 participants indicated a clear preference for an online format.

Research Question 1: What are the motives of educators who choose to participate in extended, elective professional development?

In response to the post-2023 institute participant survey, participants valued the ability to take this PD online, and it was a contributing factor to their ability and eagerness to participate.

Research Question 2: What is the impact of the digital format on the engagement of the educators who participated in the extended, elective professional development?

Compared to the participation of the Summer 2022 PD offering where only one participant showed up, the engagement rate indicated an increase in accessibility. Additionally, when asked in the post 2023 institute participant survey about online delivery, only one response indicated a preference for a face-to-face format.

Mapping Results

Another consideration within the study was that the provision of remote learning led to greater geographic diversity. The map below (see Illustration 1) demonstrates the difference in geographical locations of the participants from the face-to-face PD offering in 2022 to the online PD offering in 2023. This comparison demonstrated an increase in participation from areas outside the region. For the 2022 institute, the furthest participant from the location of the face-to-face institute was about 53 kilometers from the site. However, for the 2023 online offering, four participants were more than 259 kilometers away, and the furthest participant from the host university was 447 kilometers.

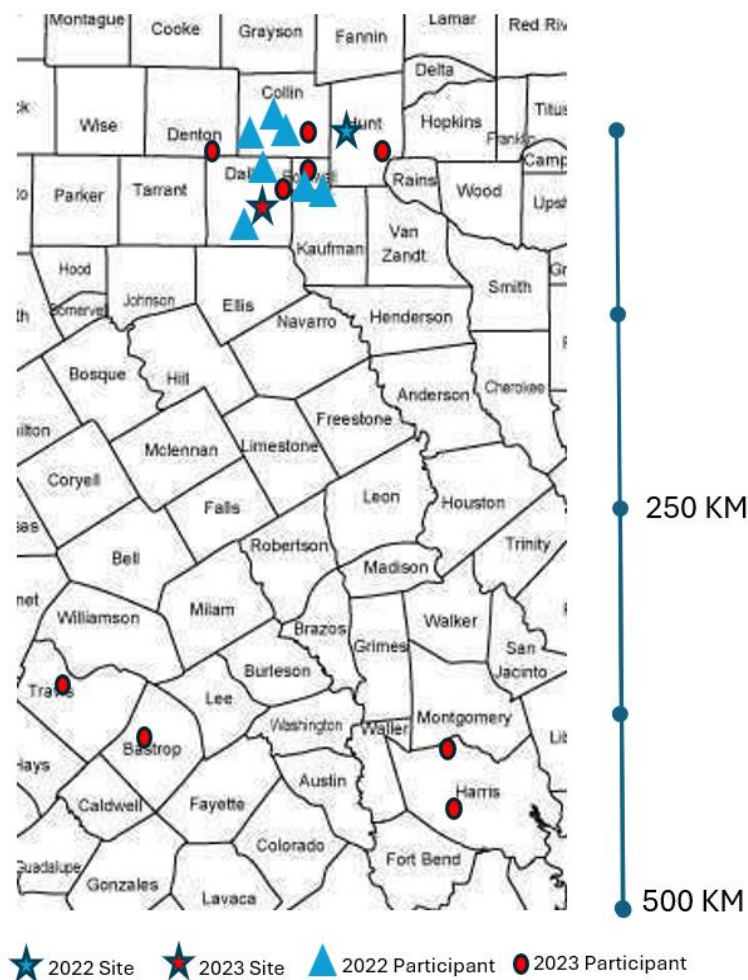


Illustration 1. Mapping Distances between the Site and Participant Addresses

Research Question 1: What are the motives of educators who choose to participate in extended, elective professional development?

Based on the map, close geographical proximity did not lead to engagement in the 2022 summer institute. However, in 2023, the engagement was higher even with extended geographical barriers. Geographical concerns seem to have not been a motive or barrier once the summer institute was moved online.

Research Question 2: What is the impact of the digital format on the engagement of the educators who participated in the extended, elective professional development?

The map indicates that the impact of the digital format increased participation and extended the geographical reach of the summer institute.

Focus Group Analysis and Findings

With a goal of digging deeper into the responses to the post 2023 institute participant survey, four participants were invited to participate in a focus group. The questions for the focus group were created to directly address the research questions and expand the understanding of the responses to the post 2023 survey. The analysis reveals several themes including the desire to work on personal writing goals, the convenience of earning college credit for the institute, and the perceived need to improve pedagogical skills for teaching writing to students.

Research Question 1: What are the motives of educators who choose to participate in extended, elective professional development?

The motives that were identified in the focus group included: the expression of personal writing goals, the desire to improve pedagogical skills, and the need to earn graduate credit.

Personal Writing Goals: Creating time, space, and opportunity for our participants to pursue their own writing goals is a value for our program. Teachers participating in their own writing has a side effect of putting teachers in the seat of students who are learning new writing approaches and remembering how young writers think. This also supports community development where writers encourage writers to write, and readers read what writers have to say (National Writing Project, 2006).

Participants shared that the writing institute helped them meet their personal writing goals. One participant shared that her work over the summer “improve[d] my writing as far as building my voice and the other aspects about writing that I don’t always practice.” Several times, participants identified the opportunity to slow down and focus on their writing as a major characteristic of their experience. For example, one stated that the “writing project taught [them] that [they] really do need to slow down ... that there’s a way to be a teacher and to be a writer, and you don’t have to sacrifice one or the other.” This effect seems to have lasted long past our two-week institute period, with a participant reporting that they’ve continued “slowing down a lot just so [they] can continue to write” for themselves.

One well-known mantra of leaders across the National Writing Project is *teachers teaching teachers*, and this is meant to identify and support teacher-leaders and to recognize teachers as knowledgeable participants in learning (National Writing Project, 2024). These summer institutes are designed to bring together teachers of all experience levels, grades, and disciplines in order to share successful practices and test out new approaches and ideas while encouraging these educators to pursue their own writing goals. Our participants clearly appreciated that

opportunity to focus on growing as a writer – a pursuit that may be sacrificed while instructing young writers.

However, for one participant with a strong personal writing focus, they noted “time constraints” as a drawback of the summer institute experience. Although this person was referring more to their own busy schedule during the institute, preventing them from giving themselves over totally to the writing portion of the experience, they captured the concerns of the director who shared, “one of [their] biggest concerns is that it will feel rushed or less serious if we aren’t in the same physical space together.”

Desire for Pedagogy: Balancing the development of the participant writers with their needs as teachers of writers was also an ongoing concern. One participant shared that they were “expecting more pedagogy.” One of the goals of the summer writing institute was to provide an immersive writing experience for the participants as they explored issues in the teaching of reading and writing with the intent of expanding teachers’ capacity to not only instruct but also empathize with their student writers. The paired expectations are demonstrated when one participant said “[the institute] open[ed] [their] eyes on how much of an expert [they are] on certain things,” highlighting the importance of remembering that [their] participants are both teachers and writers. Then another mentioned that the structure of the institute provided “a great way to set a student up ... for writing.” The opportunity to figure out how to “innovate inside the box” was championed by one participant, who also “left with the desire to dive a little deeper with some of the things that [they] talked about ... like reading and writing workshops.”

As working educators, the participants were vocal about their desire to improve their classroom practice. One participant “hoped [to] learn something to help [them] become a better writing teacher.” Another shared, “[They wanted to] get some ideas that they could bring back to the teachers at my campus.” These participants had clear goals of matching this professional development directly to the work of their classroom and campuses.

Another participant was looking for new ideas and wanting to evolve professionally, sharing that, “[They] really wanted to just find out some new ideas and new ways of thinking about approaching writing and the classroom.” This participant had seen a colleague’s transformative classroom practices and wanted to emulate them. Approaching this same idea from a position of need, another self-identified as having a “weakness” in the area of “teaching writing,” and hoped to learn something to improve their practice.

However, an ongoing emphasis on testing in the school districts challenges teachers’ capacity to teach writing authentically. Developing accomplished writers through meaningful and engaging writing experiences is a fundamental principle of the National Writing Project (2024). Yet, the reality of testing demands was a compelling reason to offer SI participants joyful and authentic writing experiences that they could apply to their own pedagogy. We saw this conflict play out in one participant’s concern that “this is all fine and good, but [they teach] a STAAR-tested subject, so [they] can’t do all this fun stuff.” STAAR is the acronym for the state assessment required for the students in this context. This ongoing concern brings the state-to-district-to-classroom demands that testing is *THE* priority into every layer of modern education, even one as immersive and authentic as the National Writing Project.

Working for Credit: Because students in our university's graduate school can participate in the summer institute for credit, the researchers anticipated this would show up in the focus group data. However, aside from one short mention, participants did not prioritize school credit as a motivating factor in their participation. The one mention occurred when a participant talked about "[doing] the class assignment to get... credit." Had different participants been chosen for the focus group, it is possible that "course credit" would have shown up as a larger factor in this data set.

Research Question 2: What is the impact of the digital format on the engagement of the educators who participated in the extended, elective professional development?

To accommodate the geographical and schedule constraints of the summer institute participants, an online schedule was created to maximize the value of the synchronous time using procedures and group-created norms. The schedule included three time blocks in a daily routine. The morning block, 9-11:00AM, started with time to write and share with the group before moving into the main topic of study for the day. Then the midday block, 11-1:00PM, was a time for groups to meet for book clubs, shared study groups, and independent writing time. Finally, the afternoon block, 1-3:00PM, brought the community back together to share work from the midday block and participate in an interactive teaching lesson before ending the day with shared "ah-has." One participant described this format as "being in balance, like there was lecture time. There was some writing time. There were lots of breaks, where [they] could work on [their] own or with others. That really worked well."

Specific Supports: Participants appreciated the online format as some required this type of structure to be able to participate. One participant shared that if she "had to drive... [she] probably wouldn't have done it," and she appreciated being able to collaborate with "people from a variety of different places." Another participant really valued the mid-afternoon time to work saying "give [them] something to do, and then let [them] work..." They added, "... the format they used, [they] really believe they could teach that to other people." Several participants were concerned before the institute about the amount of time they would be expected to be online each day. One was "nervous about... sitting in front of a computer all day," so the chunking of time helped the work feel authentic and dynamic instead of long-lectures and passive engagement.

Specific Barriers: However, there were barriers, too. Two participants craved face-to-face interactions saying they "prefer working with people in person but had a great time with the online writing project," and another spoke about how important facial expressions were for them, but they could not really "see some faces or some expressions people were making." Distractions were also an issue when one participant tried "to be at work and finish the project." While another also noted that "[they were] doing too much, and [they] didn't feel like [they] could give the quality work that [they] could typically create." The pacing was also a concern, specifically with the book clubs, a small-group mid-afternoon pursuit, "felt really rushed... and it seemed kind of pointless."

In response to the question, the impact of the digital format was that all of the participants were happy with their overall online experience and felt that the format supported active engagement and collaboration. One participant was "actually surprised ... how connected [they] were still able to get" and that it was "really a good experience,

even virtually.” One participant, who had participated in two other NWP affiliates before, instructed the directors to stay true to its “core” and not “[stray] away from it.” Indicating that the online format met that goal, but that there was a chance that it could slip away if it was not carefully monitored.

Focus Group on Interpersonal Connections and Community: Strong interpersonal connections are an important theme at every stage of engagement. For all of the participants, their personal connections to successful educators who were part of the National Writing Project prompted their participation, and then within the time of the online institute, the collaborative experiences with others enhanced the learning and engagement of the experience.

Each of the participants in the focus group shared a significant educator who had invited them to participate in the summer institute. For two participants, an English teacher they admired, who had good approaches to writing instruction, had shared that they had started their journeys with an affiliate of the National Writing Project. Another participant was encouraged by their district ELAR coordinator to participate, and for the other, they worked with several faculty who were part of a writing project affiliate who had recommended they apply. Interestingly, none of these respondents found this opportunity independently or from marketing and recruiting efforts; they were all led to this opportunity by word of mouth.

During the focus group, the participants were asked about their engagement with the ongoing writing project community, but the responses were brief and sometimes vague. In a traditional NWP summer institute, building interpersonal relationships within the community is a major component. The relationships built between the teachers is often the most powerful outcome that leads to continued engagement with the writing project beyond the summer institute. Although a few of the participants have continued to participate, the absence of responses with this theme in the focus group demonstrated a general lack of connection to the other educators in the institute.

One participant commented on “how connected we were still able to get... virtually,” and another was able to “[bounce] ideas off of people.” They expressed the pedagogical support provided by the groups and how they set each other up to write and feel comfortable sharing their writing. But another was frustrated with the book clubs because peers didn’t have time to read, and it “seemed pointless.” So, though the institute facilitated “the ability... to be able to work together,” and the participants all shared that they “had a great time,” the lack of specifics and elaboration on this very important theme that is a central value of this professional development needs to be improved. The disconnect between participants is likely because of the online format and more intentional efforts should be made to engage the participants in more meaningful ways with each other.

Conclusion

After poor attendance for the 2022 National Writing Project of North East Texas summer institute, the researchers reimagined the 2023 summer institute with a fully online format. Efforts were made to fully engage the participants with a schedule that facilitated interactions between the whole group and small groups while still providing individual time to work on writing and inquiries. Additional efforts were made to make the institute meaningful for the participants in terms of writing practice and writing instruction.

Implications

Overall, the new online format was successful in several ways. It certainly increased the attendance. All but two of the participants that were accepted in 2023 engaged, and there was a geographical expansion of attendees indicating that physical barriers had been reduced. Additionally, there is evidence that participation in the summer institute was encouraged by other literacy professionals and word-of-mouth plays an important role in the recruitment of new participants each year. General marketing and even offering college credit seemed to play only a minor role in participation.

The participants also seemed to benefit from the online setting. Most would not have been able to participate in a face-to-face format, and their indications were that the online format was a generally positive experience. Most shared the value of writing for themselves and the connections they made to their own classrooms as positive take-away from the experience. And though the participants generally shared they felt supported by the online community, this theme did not have the strength and specificity that one would expect from an NWP summer institute experience. Efforts could be made to improve the participant-to-participant experience and to develop a rich, shared community.

For those looking to engage educators in extended, voluntary, professional development, there are three main suggestions based on the findings of our data.

1. Online formatting needs to be chunked into various types of learner experiences and interactions to keep the learners engaged.
2. The best recruitment for this type of learning comes from the success of previous participants. An invitation from a respected peer seems to be the best way to recruit new applicants.
3. Participants enjoy learning new skills, in this case improved writing, but they need explicit connections to the implementation of these practices into their own classrooms including connections to mandated testing requirements.

Recommendations

These recommendations will seek to provide insight as to how the results of this study could be further enhanced, lead to a wider reach, and promote varying methods of teaching and learning that foster collaborative environments which will grow instructional practices inside and beyond the classroom setting.

Virtual National Writing Project Summer Institutes

Summer institutes of the past were primarily held in face-to-face settings and consisted of a gathering of participants from within the Writing Project site's local communities. Over time, with newer technologies, this has allowed for the past formats of the summer institutes to be under consideration for updated delivery methods. Virtual technology has challenged old ways of conducting institutes and stretched with the creativity of the planners or facilitators and participants.

There is a need to explore how many of the NWP sites across the country conduct only virtual formats when facilitating their summer institute. In addition to exploring how writing project sites format their institute's logistics, more research is needed on the types of communities that are being built within these formats. Questions regarding general participant engagement, limitations or lack of limitations on the types of literacy activities, and incentives for this (virtual) format need current data collected.

Research regarding the duration of institutes as a whole and the daily commitments from facilitators as well as participants need to be examined. Most importantly, with a format such as a virtual institute, the extent to which the event has existed or been sustained should be shared as well. Other questions to be considered about virtual summer institutes include:

- What does a summer institute look like when it is not forced to be virtual due to safety (i.e. virtual only because of the COVID pandemic)?
- Do virtual summer institutes exclude certain populations of educators from participating?
- Is there a difference in preference in formats (virtual or face-to-face) for in-service teachers versus teacher educators, and other guests?

This study highlighted several of the positive benefits and observations of having a virtual setting, but more specific research is also needed on the ever-changing challenges, demands, and reservations of holding a summer institute completely online.

Online Professional Development

The COVID pandemic caused a shift in the use of technology to teach and learn, and it also changed the manner in which educators obtained professional development and resources to enhance their teaching practices. Online professional development went from being a possible option to an absolute necessity at the peak of the pandemic. The technology had been in place for several years to hold professional development online, yet many were reluctant to move completely online, and there were some who missed the lack of personalization and socialization that in-person interactions allowed.

However, being entirely online was convenient for many educators. It allowed for participation of many collaborators who could not normally be in a room together at the same time, and it challenged educators to find ways to engage students in non-traditional classroom (online) settings. It also presented opportunities for educators to more widely share online resources and to help one another to grow in their ability to reach students in a manner that had not been previously explored.

More research is needed in the area of online professional development for educators. Some questions that could be posed are:

- Does online professional development allow for educators to truly engage with the learning community?
- Will holding online professional development opportunities in educational settings (higher education, K-12, etc.) encourage educators to participate in more offerings?
- What challenges does online professional development present?

- What benefits does online professional development offer?
- Does online professional development work better for certain grade level educators, or educators of specific subject areas?
- Which strategies and teaching styles work best for providing online professional development?
- Is online professional development for educators being used on an international level? Or are online professional development opportunities more prominent in certain parts of the world?
- Do educators have the technology infrastructure needed to successfully provide and receive online professional development?

Further Exploration of Online Writing Communities

Online writing communities have been around since the Internet was made publicly available. From writing contests in various genres, to the invention of blogs (and subscriptions to blogs), online writing communities have been around for approximately thirty years. However, for many of those years, in educational spaces, writing communities were often limited to spaces that were used for references and resources or for editing and revising purposes.

The current state of online writing communities that are offered are more widespread and range from intimate groups or “closed” groups for those with particular interests that want to remain anonymous or semi-private to those who want to publicly share their work through blogging, social media, or even present in academic settings. Universities offer a wide range of writing resources and build communities to help individual students with their studies. There are also organizations and movements created to support academic settings that have the purpose of extending the learning community and collaboration on a widespread level such as NWP.

With the development of more advanced technology, the development of online writing communities should continue to progress as well. How such communities will factor into K-12 education and academia is an area that should be further studied. The following questions could lead to greater insight:

- How can online writing communities for educators enhance teaching in K-12 settings?
- How can online writing communities for students enhance learning in K-12 settings?
- What grade levels or sectors within education need online writing communities the most?
- What are the essential components that are needed within online writing communities for educators/instructors?
- What are the essential components that are needed within online writing communities for students?
- Are online writing communities being used to help foster collaboration between educators and students on an international level? Or are these communities more prominent in certain parts of the world?
- What types of online writing communities currently exist in K-12 settings?
- Which formats (hybrid, entirely online, etc.) work best for online writing communities?
- What are the most current platforms dedicated to online collaboration in writing and which work best for teaching and learning?
- Do online writing communities exclude certain demographics of educators or students?

Online environments can change in an instant. The flexibility that an online presence and collaboration offer provide a means to pivot during the present times and future changes in education that one might not see coming.

Implications to Professional Development Professionals

Many lessons have been learned in the attempt to provide on-line instruction to support the learning of these inservice professionals. Below are a few suggestions from the experience with the 2022 and 2023 Writing Project Summer Invitational Institute.

1. Be willing to reimagine formerly successful professional development opportunities by narrowing your goals.
2. Invite inservice teachers be vulnerable in their learning and confidently lead when they have expertise.
3. Explicitly communicate to inservice teachers what the expectations will be and give them some sample agendas of a couple of days, so they can plan for success.
4. Plan events for inservice teachers to provide feedback on their experience and then apply their feedback to future offerings.

Teachers are carrying heavy burdens which include demands to participate in PD. This study shows that educators will most likely engage in PD that makes the best use of their time and considers their personal needs. PD must be organized in ways to assure educators that their individual growth is valued while providing space to engage with the content and with each other. Extended summer institutes offer teachers an ideal opportunity to slow down and learn.

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