

## **In What Ways Do Teacher Education Courses Change Teachers' Self Confidence as Writers?**

**By Chris Street & Kristin K. Stang**

The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges (2006) specifies that writing-across-the-curriculum programs (including post-secondary coursework) should be well supported. They also challenge teacher preparation programs to provide opportunities for "teachers already in the classroom to upgrade their writing skills and competence as writing teachers" (p. 65). Yet many classroom teachers do not feel comfortable teaching writing, nor do they feel knowledgeable about how to use writing with students (Murphy, 2003; Napoli, 2001; Street, 2003).

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This lack of confidence may be due to the fact that teachers are heavily influenced by their own histories as writers (Mathers, Kushner-Benson, & Newton, 2007; Street, 2003). From Lortie (1975) onwards, research has consistently reported on the powerful influence that teachers' preexisting attitudes about teaching exert on their learning (Clifford & Green, 1996; Florio-Ruane & Lensmire; Grossman et al., 2000; Schmidt & Kennedy, 1990; Shrofel, 1991). Since "teachers enter their professional education already trapped in their own relationship with the subject" (Kennedy, 1998, p. 14),

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the writing attitudes and experiences that they bring with them to the university may be difficult to change.

The National Writing Project (NWP) is a group that understands this issue, believing that teachers must be comfortable and confident with writing before they can feel a sense of competence with the teaching of writing (Bratcher & Stroble, 1994). As suggested by the NWP, until teachers know as insiders what writing is like, they will never truly be able to teach their students to write well. With this consideration in mind, every attempt is made to immerse NWP teachers in the role of authors, asking them to experience writing from the inside out. As chronicled by Lieberman and Wood (2002), “Core activities during the summer institutes include sharing best lessons or strategies, participating in small writing groups, and receiving peer feedback” (p. 40) from their colleagues.

A substantial body of research suggests that most teachers are not prepared to use writing with their students (National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2006; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006). When teachers do experience professional development in this area, it is often a single workshop devoted to writing across the curriculum or is not specific to the individual needs of the teacher (Lieberman & Wood, 2003; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006). This is unfortunate, since teachers serve as a crucial link in the continued move to improve the literacy skills of K-12 students (Allington & Johnston, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Instersegmental Committee, 2000; National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006).

Though the need for professional development in writing is apparent, research on models of professional development in this area are sparse. However, the National Writing Project has emerged as one highly effective model of professional development, offering teachers the kind of support that research suggests that they require (Bratcher & Stroble, 1994; Lieberman & Wood, 2002, 2003; National Writing Project, & Nagin, 2006; Raymond, 1994; Street, 2003; Street & Stang, 2008). The NWP model of professional development addresses the issue of how to build teachers’ self-confidence as writers in the context of offering them meaningful and sustained professional development.

The NWP realizes that professional development needs to begin where the teachers are, acknowledging that the writing histories of teachers are a vital consideration when working with teachers. As is evidenced from research, the writing histories of teachers play an important role in their ability—or inability—to use writing with their students (Bratcher & Stroble, 1994; Chambless & Bass, 1995; Pajares, 1996; Pajares & Johnson, 1994; Street, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

A growing body of evidence suggests that the NWP model of professional development is highly effective when participating teachers receive district support (Marshall & Pritchard, 2002). Moreover, trained teachers demonstrate changes in how they teach writing (Fanscali & Silverstein, 2002), most notably in the time devoted to writing (Fanscali, Nelsestuen, & Weinbaum, 2001; Fischer, 1997; Laub,

1996) and the number of writing strategies employed (Inverness Research Associates, 1997; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; St. John, Dickey, Hirabayashi, & Stokes, 2001). More than two decades of evidence continues to highlight the “positive effects of NWP training on teaching practices” (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006, p. 284).

Though evidence of the effectiveness of the NWP on student achievement is quite limited, results from the research record on student writing over time favor the NWP approach over traditional writing approaches (Marshall & Pritchard, 2002; Pritchard, 1987; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006; Shook, 1981). The multiple factors that make describing and defining this model of professional development so difficult also serve as pillars of strength of the model. Yet the adaptability of the model, the focus on developing a sense of community, and the deep respect for what teachers do also serve as its core strengths, enabling it to remain as arguably the most successful teaching network in the United States (Lieberman & Wood, 2002; Wood & Lieberman, 2000). This was the model of professional development that served as the foundation for the writing course described in this research. Preliminary results (Street & Stang, 2008) suggest that this model of professional development is highly successful with practicing secondary school teachers.

In this study, we asked the following questions:

1. What levels of self-confidence did in-service secondary teachers hold regarding writing when they entered their first semester of their graduate programs?
2. What were the major influences on these levels of self-confidence?
3. What was the impact of a graduate-level writing course on the secondary teachers’ self-confidence as writers?

## **Methodology**

### **Researchers’ Stances**

After having studied Delgado-Gaitan’s (1993) notion of the researcher as insider or outsider, the research team chose a combination of one insider and one outsider in order to minimize possible biases that might have resulted from established relationships between the students in the course studied and the researcher. The first author was the instructor of the graduate writing course; he had a teaching and research background in literacy as well as a research interest in studying teachers as writers. A former middle school and community college English teacher, this researcher had extensive experience teaching writing. Moreover, as a teacher/fellow with the National Writing Project, he was in a good position to understand the participants’ experiences as they struggled to develop as writers and as teachers of writing.

However, in order to gain a more objective view of the experiences of these participants, the second researcher was crucial to this study. She, too, had a strong

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interest in writing pedagogy and the relationship between writing self-efficacy and writing instruction. As a former middle school special educator, she co-taught language arts to a diverse group of learners and facilitated writing across the curriculum for students with special needs. The second author was teaching graduate level courses for pre- and inservice teachers and specialized in assessment and instructing students on writing literature reviews. The second author's research interests included survey assessment and quantitative data analysis.

#### ***The Writing Course***

Data were derived from a semester-long graduate writing course designed to improve the professional writing skills of middle and high school educators teaching in all content areas. A secondary goal of the course was to encourage these teachers to integrate writing into their classroom instruction. The course followed the basic tenets of the National Writing Project model of professional development. As they wrote every week, teachers studied research on writing, explored writing resources, and developed their own specific areas of writing expertise.

On written assignments, teachers received significant feedback from their instructor; in fact, these assignments could be rewritten as many times as the students liked. This revision policy was both necessary and appreciated by the students, since "earning an "A" in this class indicated that the instructor believed the students' work was "publication ready." As suggested by the NWP and others (Fearn & Farnan, 2001; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006; Street, 2002), it is important for teachers to realize that revision is at the heart of writing well.

Class assignments and papers focused on effective writing, writing across the curriculum, writing for professional audiences, and teaching writing to adolescents. Teachers were also expected to participate in numerous in-class and online discussions, write reports to administrators, and complete several brief papers and class assignments. As the capstone assignment for the class, students either wrote an article for publication or developed a grant proposal.

#### ***Participants***

All participants were completing their master's degrees in secondary education at a large urban university in southern California; they were taking this required course in the first semester of their graduate program. A total of 28 students were eligible and willing to participate in the research project. One student chose to drop the course and was therefore excluded from final data analysis. Two students who were willing to participate and completed the course requirements were also excluded from the study as they were not currently teaching in secondary schools. The resulting 25 participants were in-service teachers who gave informed consent to participate and ranged in age from 25 to 50 years. All participants were practicing middle or high school teachers who had been teaching from 1-20 years across school districts in a variety of content areas (see Table 1). As is typical of local

schools, most of the teachers taught classes that included both special education students (92%) and English Language Learners (96%).

**Research Design**

Due to our desire to both explore and explain these teachers' experiences, we used a mixed-methods research design (Creswell, 2003). Specifically, we chose a sequential exploratory design (Creswell) because our primary desire was to explore the phenomenon of these teachers as writers. The initial phase of the study focused exclusively on qualitative data collection and analysis. This was followed by a phase of quantitative data collection and analysis. The findings from these two phases were integrated in the interpretation phase. Consistent with this mixed-methods strategy, the qualitative aspects of the study were given priority.

**Table 1**  
**Participant Demographics (N = 25)**

	Frequency	Percentage
Grade Levels Taught		
Middle School	15	60.0
High School	10	40.0
Gender		
Male	9	36.0
Female	16	64.0
Ethnicity		
Asian American	7	28.0
Caucasian	13	52.0
Hispanic	3	12.0
Other	2	8.0
Number of Years Taught		
One	2	8.0
2-5	14	56.0
6-10	8	32.0
16-20	1	4.0
Courses Taught		
Art	1	4.0
Language Arts	5	20.0
Mathematics	8	32.0
Sciences	5	20.0
Social Sciences	3	12.0
Spanish	1	4.0
Vocational	1	4.0
Other	1	4.0

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*Qualitative data.* At the beginning and end of the course, students responded to an open-ended questionnaire designed to provide the instructor with a better picture of who the students were as writers. Discussion messages were also culled from the class, where the students had numerous online discussions of course readings, generating over 600 student-created messages. All participants also completed a writing history essay in which they reflected on their lives as writers. The instructor modeled this assignment by sharing his own writing autobiography with the class (Street, 1998). These essays allowed the participants to openly reflect on their learning experiences as they recalled the successes and challenges faced over the course of their lives as writers. Numerous brief papers, reports to administrators, lesson plans, and reflection pieces were used as secondary data sources.

The first author made detailed observational notes in an electronic journal after each weekly meeting of the course. This approach entailed observing with a wide view of the entire learning experience, in accordance with Marshall and Rossman's (1995) notions that "observation is a fundamental and critical method in all qualitative inquiry" (p. 80). These reflections served as a way to review important themes raised during each class meeting.

In sum, qualitative data sources included the following: open-ended questionnaires, online discussion postings, writing history essays, brief papers, reports to administrators, lesson plans, reflection pieces, and the instructor's reflective journal. This allowed for ample data triangulation (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

*Quantitative data.* At the end of the course, students responded to an electronically administered survey that contained three distinct sections. The first section required responses to demographic and teaching information. The second section required responses to self-efficacy Likert-scale items. In the third section, students responded to an open-ended question designed to elicit views of their self-confidence as writers following completion of the course. In this study only data from the first and third sections were analyzed.

### **Data Analysis**

*Qualitative analysis.* In naturalistic inquiry, data analysis is closely connected with data collection and generation, and the "researcher him- or herself becomes the most significant instrument for data collection and analysis" (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 39). The course instructor served as the primary data-collection instrument in this study. In accordance with the multiperspective nature of the constructivist paradigm, this interpretation existed as only one of many possible constructions of reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data analysis began when students' writing-history, open-ended questionnaire responses, written assignments, and online discussion forum postings were collected and pasted in a single Microsoft Word documents for each participant. All data sources

and field notes were read and reread. Color codes were used to highlight key words and phrases; marginal notes of significant thoughts related to the research questions were also added. A graduate student who was not associated with the writing course served to establish the emerging themes by reviewing qualitative data in raw form. Provisional categories were then established by the researchers. These provisional categories included teacher's biographies as writers, changing perceptions of themselves as writers, and issues related to the efficacy of the graduate course.

Each student's data were then reviewed again by the primary researcher and the graduate assistant in order to determine the student's overall level of self-confidence regarding writing. Within each student's Microsoft Word file, red text was used to highlight examples of poor self-confidence as writers, yellow for neutral self-confidence levels, and green for positive levels of self-confidence. Consensus was achieved only after multiple items were reviewed again by both authors of the study. Since the participants were content-area teachers representing various disciplines, we expected that we would see a range of comfort levels with writing (see Table 2).

Next, the first author wrote a detailed summary for each of the 25 students in the class. The summaries provided an opportunity to consider evolving impressions of who these teachers were as writers. Then, the data was reread more closely to see if the original impressions were supported by the evolving data record. This process continued as new data emerged throughout the course. Careful checking of the researcher's interpretation of the information provided by the informants, termed "member checking," was essential to establishing the credibility of the study's results (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants responded to member checking queries, discussed monthly at class meetings. Specifically, the developing themes were copied and passed out to all members of the class on a monthly basis. Then, class time was devoted to discussing those themes. The themes were clarified and expanded upon, based on the insights provided by the members of the class.

*Quantitative analysis.* Demographic information and responses from the open-ended question in the third section of course survey were analyzed quantitatively. Descriptive statistics, including response frequency and response averages were calculated to describe the data. Self-confidence group membership was coded with a numerical value where *Positive*=1, *Neutral*=2, and *Negative*=3 for both the pre- and post-course group assignments. A paired samples t-test was run to see if the observed difference between group membership pre and post the course was significant with significance established at  $p<0.05$ . Data were also analyzed to see if there were any significant relationships ( $p<0.05$ ) between gender, years teaching, and subject matter or grade level taught, and group membership pre and post course completion.

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**Table 2**  
**Participants Grouped According**  
**to Pre-Course Self-Confidence as Writers (N = 25)**

<i>Group</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>JH/HS</i>	<i>Yrs Tching</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Subject</i>
Positive ( <i>n</i> = 5)					
	Male	HS	11-15	Caucasian	Math
	Female	HS	2-5	Caucasian	Science
	Male	HS	2-5	Asian-Amer.	Science
	Male	HS	2-5	Asian-Amer.	Math
	Female	JH	2-5	Caucasian	Arts
Neutral ( <i>n</i> = 8)					
	Female	JH	2-5	Asian-Amer.	Language Arts
	Female	HS	2-5	Hispanic	Language Arts
	Female	HS	11-15	Caucasian	Science
	Female	JH	11-15	Caucasian	Social Science
	Female	JH	2-5	Asian-Amer.	Math
	Male	JH	2-5	Asian-Amer.	Language Arts
	Male	JH	2-5	Hispanic	Language Arts.
	Male	JH	2-5	Asian-Amer.	Science
Negative ( <i>n</i> = 12)					
	Female	HS	2-5	Hispanic	Math
	Male	HS	2-5	Other	Social Sciences
	Male	JH	2-5	Caucasian	Math
	Female	JH	16-20	Caucasian	Physical Ed.
	Female	JH	2-5	Other	Social Sciences
	Female	HS	2-5	Caucasian	Foreign Languages
	Female	HS	2-5	Caucasian	Science
	Female	HS	1	Asian-Amer.	Math
	Female	HS	11-15	Caucasian	Math
	Female	JH	11-15	Caucasian	Vocational Ed.
	Male	HS	11-15	Caucasian	Math
	Female	HS	1	Caucasian	Language Arts

## Results

### Question One:

#### ***The Writing Self-Confidence of Teachers***

Student self-confidence was measured through qualitative data at both the beginning and end of the course. Students were grouped according to their positive, neutral, or negative beliefs regarding their own self-confidence as writers. Of the 25 students, five had *positive* levels of self-confidence as writers (20%), eight were *neutral* (32%), and 12 had *negative* feelings of self-confidence as writers (48%) as they entered the course (see Table 2). As is evident in this table, self-confidence—or



lack thereof—was not associated with any particular grade level or content area. In fact, no significant relationships between gender, years teaching, subject matter or grade level taught, and group membership were identified.

Teachers holding negative feelings of self-confidence when the class began expressed their views in various ways ( $n=12$ ). For this group of teachers, writing was often described as an event that induced “panic,” “uneasiness,” or “hatred.” Writing was something to be avoided, as summed up by one science teacher whose views seemed to represent the other teachers in this low-confidence group: “I will pretty much do anything to not do it.” These teachers avoided writing because they feared it, and they feared it because they felt “terrible at it.” One teacher’s comments were paralleled by several other teachers from this group: “If I can pass the responsibility [for writing] on to some one else, I do.” Whether these teachers were describing their histories as writers in their autobiographical essays, responding to online discussion prompts, or answering open-ended questions, their voices were consistent: They were not writers, did not want to write, and when forced to write, they “suffered through the process.”

The teachers in the neutral group ( $n=8$ ) had similar views regarding writing, but their tone was not as negative as the writers’ with the poorest levels of writing self-confidence. Jamie, a high school social studies teacher, was a typical teacher from the neutral group, believing that “writing is tough and it takes time.” Not overly positive or clearly negative, the teachers from the neutral group tended to see writing as something that they could do, though they did not relish the thought of writing, nor did they feel especially self-confident as writers. This lack of confidence was evidenced in the comments of Janice, a high school science teacher, who stated that “Writing is still difficult. . . . However, that’s not all bad.” This idea of “writing not being all that bad” emerged as a consistent theme among the teachers in the neutral group. Irene, a middle school math teacher, wrote in response to an open-ended questionnaire prompt that “Although writing does not happen to be one of my favorite things to do, I do not despise it. As long as I am not writing under pressure or under a time constraint, I do not mind the writing process.” In their autobiographical essays, the neutral writers tended to describe themselves as did Ginny, a high school English teacher, who wrote “I consider myself an average writer. I do a lot of the work in one sitting and when I am forced to produce, I can get it done.” These writers tended to see themselves as fairly proficient writers, but they did not exude confidence, as did the teachers in the confident writing group.

Those teachers who came into the class as self-confident writers ( $n=5$ ) expressed views quite different from the other two groups of teachers. Instead of fearing writing and focusing on negative aspects of writing, they remarked on how “well supported” they remembered feeling as student writers, how they “loved to read and write,” and how writing was a part of their lives. The theme of self-confidence clearly ran throughout the participants’ autobiographical essays, questionnaire responses, and online discussion postings.

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These were the students in the class who were eager to improve as writers—and as teachers of writing. The experiences they shared painted a picture quite different from the writers in the other two groups. For example, Bill, a math teacher, wrote in his writing-history essay that “I am a capable writer and competent enough to be published. I have always been a confident writer.” This state of self-confidence was echoed by the other confident writers, whose views were remarkably consistent regarding their long-standing sense of confidence as writers. They had years of experience “getting high marks” as writers. When asked to describe themselves as writers, these teachers tended to echo the thoughts of Katalina, a high school science teacher: “Overall, I enjoy writing. I loved my English classes in high school and college and always did well in them. I think that I am a pretty capable writer.” These were the teachers who, like Joe, a math teacher, described writing as being able “to articulate my thoughts into an elegant and grammatically correct string of words which eventually make up the sentences and paragraphs that will capture the attention of my intended audience.” As confident writers, these students came into the class as writers who were eager to improve their already well developed writing skills.

#### **Question Two:**

#### ***Major Influences on Teachers’ Levels of Self-Confidence as Writers?***

When considering what these teachers viewed as the most important factors that influenced their views on writing, the vast majority of the participants (80%,  $n=20$ ) mentioned teachers and school experiences. It was notable how consistently the kinds of school experiences were related to the teachers’ level of self-confidence as writers: poor, neutral, or positive. Sadly, the majority of the school experiences recounted by the 12 teachers from the poor self-confidence group were quite poor, reflecting years of “criticism,” “harshness,” and “resentment.” Kimberly, now a high school English teacher, recalled a particularly distressing experience while she was a student in a two-year college:

I had to write a paper for my critical thinking class. I don’t remember exactly what the paper was about; I only remember the negative remarks that the instructor covered my paper with. The main remark I remember is when she wrote “DUH!!!” on my paper. I could not believe my eyes when I read that. It was the most degrading thing I have ever had a teacher write on my paper throughout my entire educational career.

Amber, a math teacher, had this to say when asked to describe the influences of her development as a writer:

I do not think I am a good writer. I view writing as a chore and I cannot remember ever viewing it as anything else. I believe this view was established in school, when I was first taught to write.

Teachers from the negative self-confidence group ( $n=12$ ), such as Kelly and Amber, painted a remarkably consistent picture of school writing experiences as being quite depressing. Even for the two teachers who described nonteachers as

the primary influences on their development as writers, the role of former teachers was always present. One of the reluctant writers recalled how she took after her father, who was “a horrible writer.”

I took after him. But also, as I was going through grade school I was put in remedial reading, and then in the lower-level classes because of my test scores. Because I was in the “dumb” class I thought I was dumb. Once I was in HS, I didn’t hate English and writing as much and I did well. I just think teachers had low expectations of me and unfortunately I met them.

The teachers from the neutral self-confidence group ( $n=8$ ) still recounted mostly negative experiences in school as influencing their views as adult writers today, yet they also recounted some solid teachers who supported their development as writers. Eden, an English teacher, said that “My entire high school senior year was a negative writing experience.” Yet she also pointed to some successful college courses that really helped her to see herself as a competent writer. This was also true of several others in their writing group. These writers tended to have K-12 experiences that were largely negative, yet many of them also recounted successful writing experiences that helped to shape who they were as writers today. As a representative example of this theme, Evan, now an English teacher, remembered many “terrific guides” that helped him as a student while noting other teachers who had “ravaged his papers.”

Of the five teachers who entered the class as confident writers, all had generally positive school experiences. They recounted “winning writing awards,” writing for their newspapers, and working with “very effective teachers.” Eva, a science teacher, recalled how her school experiences “made me like writing.” In addition to having generally positive memories of their school writing experiences, these confident writers often mentioned others who were responsible for their positive views. Three of these writers mentioned parents, favorite authors, and friends who were writers as helping them to see themselves as writers.

Except for the self-confident writers in the class, these data suggest that the way in which writing previously was taught to these teachers did little to aid their ability to view writing positively. In fact, in certain cases, negative school experiences had such a lasting effect that even as adults many of these teachers remained fearful of writing. Though it is tempting to overgeneralize and simplify the experiences of these teachers, their collective experiences with school-based writing and the disturbing consistency among the participants regarding their negative school memories cannot go unstated.

### **Question Three: Impact of the Course**

Following completion of the course (see Table 3), a total of seven students had *positive* levels of self-confidence as writers (28%), 15 students held *neutral* views (60%), and three students held *negative* views (12%). No significant relationships

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**Table 3**  
**Participants Grouped According to Post-Course Self-Confidence as Writers (N = 25)**

<i>Group</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>JH/HS</i>	<i>Yrs Tching</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Pre-Class</i>
Positive ( <i>n</i> =7)						
	Female	JH	2-5	Other	Social Sci.	Negative
	Female	HS	11-15	Caucasian	Social Sci.	Neutral
	Male	HS	11-15	Caucasian	Math	Positive
	Female	HS	2-5	Caucasian	Science	Positive
	Male	HS	2-5	Asian-Am.	Science	Positive
	Male	HS	2-5	Asian-Am.	Math	Positive
	Female	JH	2-5	Caucasian	Arts	Positive
Neutral ( <i>n</i> =15)						
	Female	JH	2-5	Asian-Am.	Lang. Arts	Neutral
	Female	HS	2-5	Hispanic	Math	Negative
	Female	HS	2-5	Hispanic	Lang. Arts	Neutral
	Male	HS	2-5	Other	Social Sci.	Negative
	Female	HS	11-15	Caucasian	Science	Neutral
	Male	JH	2-5	Caucasian	Math	Negative
	Female	JH	16-20	Caucasian	Physical Ed.	Negative
	Female	HS	2-5	Caucasian	For. Lang.	Negative
	Female	HS	1	Asian-Am.	Math	Negative
	Female	HS	11-15	Caucasian	Math	Negative
	Female	JH	11-15	Caucasian	Voc. Ed.	Negative
	Male	HS	11-15	Caucasian	Math	Negative
	Male	JH	2-5	Hispanic	Lang Arts	Neutral
	Male	JH	2-5	Asian-Am.	Science	Neutral
	Female	HS	1	Caucasian	Lang. Arts	Negative
Negative ( <i>n</i> =3)						
	Female	HS	2-5	Caucasian	Science	Negative
	Female	JH	2-5	Asian-Am.	Math	Neutral
	Male	JH	2-5	Asian-Am.	Lang. Arts	Neutral

between gender, years teaching, subject matter or grade level taught, and group membership post course were identified.

It is important to note that before the class, 48% (*n*=12) of the students held self-beliefs about their ability as writers, whereas after completion of the course only 12% (*n*=3) held negative self-beliefs. Of the eight students holding positive beliefs following the course, one student had moved from an originally negative self-belief, one student had moved from a neutral self-belief and the remaining five students were in the original positive group. Of the 15 students in the neutral writing group, five were originally in the neutral group and 10 had held negative beliefs. Of the three students who remained in the negative group following completion of the course, two students moved from the neutral group to the negative group and

one student's negative self-beliefs about herself as a writer remained unchanged. Paired t-test analysis revealed that a significant difference,  $t(25)=3.091$ ,  $p=.005$ , existed between student writing self-confidence group membership pre and post intervention of the writing course.

Qualitative data were also quite compelling. In the follow-up questionnaire, students were asked to describe their levels of self-confidence in the class and comment on whether they thought those self-confidence levels had changed as a result of the class. Students also responded to discussion topics that dealt with their evolving identities as writers. Finally, their writing-history essays were used to gauge how the course influenced their identities as writers.

The teachers from all three confidence groups reported that the course significantly improved their self-confidence as writers. Representative comments from those teachers who moved out of the negative self-confidence group help to articulate just why these changes in group membership occurred. Dana, a teacher who experienced "panic" whenever she was asked to write before the class, remarked that her

perceptions of writing [had] definitely changed. Before this class writing was a dreadful task that needed to be done. Writing is still a task that I continue to put off, but instead of being dreadful there is some pleasure that comes from a finished product. I have gained some respect for writers. A quality piece of writing takes alot (sic) of work. I thought that writing was easy for some and a chore for others. Ultimately there is no sense of anxiety when I have to write and that's a great feeling.

Other teachers who moved out of the negative self-confidence group mentioned that they now felt "refreshed" as writers, that they were "making progress," and that they had a better sense of writing as a process. As stated by Jennie:

I found [writing] to be much more challenging than I ever believed. Throwing thoughts and ideas onto a paper as they flow out of my head is not very good writing. The way in which I order my thoughts and ideas need to be consistent and precise. My sentences need to follow along with the topic and support each other so the reader can understand the message. According to Zinsser [2001] I have too much junk in my writing. Writing is a process of rewrites and change to reach the final product.

Kamie, one of the most fearful writers when the class began, came to see the fun side of writing again, something she "had not felt in years." In fact, she acknowledged that her

level of self-confidence changed immensely. When I entered this class I know I wrote poorly. . . . the task of writing for a graduate class frightened me. I feared turning in the first draft of my writing history paper. I knew it would come back full of suggestions, remarks, and criticism. However, I recognize that my writing improved significantly over the course of this class. I feel more comfortable asking my peers and colleagues to read my writing. I realize it will most likely need changes throughout. I can live with the fact that I will never perfect my writing; I can only better it with each revision.

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Thomas, a math teacher and reluctant writer, came to realize that his “self-confidence was definitely in the poor category at the beginning of the course. But as each assignment was completed and feedback was received, I gained more confidence as a writer.”

What is notable is that so many teachers’ views of themselves as writer improved. However, these improvements in self-confidence, though compelling, should not be accepted without qualification. Some teachers, like Amber, still would “avoid writing if given the chance,” though now she felt “more confidence as a writer.”

It was this process of constant revision that seemed most compelling to these writers. They appreciated the instructor and peer feedback that they received. They benefited from the unlimited revision policy and were able to make real gains as writers over the course of the semester. Catalina, another writer whose views really changed as a result of this course, stated that her “portfolio really represented some solid writing” and that through “constantly revising her papers,” she came to realize that writing was a “time-intensive but rewarding experience.”

Many of these teachers were genuinely surprised by their changing perceptions of their own levels of self-confidence as writers. Gabby, a math teacher, said that she “never expected that a single class could help her to see writing as a writer would see it.” Alisa, the one teacher who changed from the negative to the positive group, commented on the “positive group support” as really contributing to her changing sense of self as a writer. She had experienced many “brutal attacks” on her writing as a student, so she really appreciated the comfortable, professional atmosphere that was established in this course.

It is interesting to note that of the 25 teachers in the study, 2 teachers actually declined in self-confidence, reporting that the class hindered rather than helped their self-confidence as writers. In one case, Tobias, an English teacher who was a neutral group when the class started, stated that:

My level of self-confidence as a writer has lowered since I came into the class. I don’t think I reacted well to the level of feedback I received on the first draft of my writing history paper. I felt fairly demoralized, feeling that there was more wrong than right with my paper. I thought that perhaps it wasn’t salvageable and should be scrapped. Faced with this possibility scared me immensely. I couldn’t see the end of the process or the possibility of making it there. I wasn’t sure that I understood or had the ability to produce what my audience was looking for.

He stated that his “eyes have been opened to just how important revision and meaningful feedback is to the writing process,” yet he did not seem to find the copious amounts of instructor feedback helpful. Rather, he seemed overwhelmed by the feedback, coming to state that his earlier writing, which he described as “chaotic,” needed to be more tightly focused.

The second writer who moved into the negative group after the course was over was also overwhelmed with the feedback she received on her writing. Ivy, a math teacher, stated that “My perceptions of writing have changed dramatically in

that a once difficult task has become more challenging.” Ivy’s honest response is enlightening:

I think my self-confidence has diminished because I used to think of myself as an average writer. Recently, the more I read my own work, the more dissatisfied I become with what I produce. I think it will take some time to gain confidence as a writer, and perhaps I need to become a more avid reader before I can write with confidence.

Surrounded by their peers, many of whom were more proficient writers than they were, demonstrated for Ivy and Tobias how much they still needed to learn about writing. The class seemed to engage them in the writing process to the point where they began to see the weaknesses in their own writing that may not have been pointed out to them by previous instructors. Both had had previous instructors who “told them they were pretty good writers,” but neither had experienced an intensively focused writing course where they were expected produce writing that was “publication ready.”

### **Discussion and Implications**

As the pressure to have students graduate from public schools as competent writers mounts, it is vital to understand how to better prepare the teachers charged with the task of instructing these secondary student writers. As the emphasis on writing across the curriculum continues in our secondary schools, *all* teachers will be charged with the task of instructing secondary students to write. In addition, it is hoped that as secondary teachers become more comfortable and confident with their own writing they will become more effective teachers of writing (Bratcher & Stroble, 1994). This study provides an exploration into the complex realm of preparing all teachers to write well.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The results of this study should be interpreted with the following limitations in mind. First, since the participants consisted of class members in a single class, it was impossible to ensure a balance of race, gender, ethnicity, etc. This study is most definitely circumscribed by the experiences of these particular participants, captured during a four-month period. As the students were enrolled in other courses and were having additional professional experiences, it is difficult to attribute all change to this course alone. It would be further advantageous to examine this same group of students in a year to see if the change in writing belief was sustained and to see if there was any perceived impact upon their teaching of writing in the classroom. Second, since all data consisted of self-reports, it is possible that the participants may have been tempted to please the instructor with their responses. However, this risk is perceived as minimal since a great deal of time and effort was devoted to creating an open and comfortable class environment, one in which all class members felt free to express their opinions, regardless of how their opinions

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might differ from that of the instructor. The inherent biases of the instructor—who also served as lead author should also be mentioned. This limitation was addressed in part by the second researcher and the graduate student—both of whom provided a check on the lead researcher’s biases regarding the students in the course.

#### **Teacher Education and Staff Development**

As the importance of writing in American schools continues to be recognized (National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2006; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006), there needs to be a continued examination of how teachers are prepared to teach writing. Since most teachers receive limited amounts of training and professional development in this area (National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2006; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006), these lessons are especially informative to those professionals working in teacher education and staff development.

First, teacher preparation and staff development programs must begin with where the teachers are, acknowledging that the writing histories of teachers are a vital consideration when instructing them in writing. As was evidenced from the qualitative and quantitative data, the writing histories of these participants played a key role in their ability—or inability—to escape their own writing biographies. Research suggests that many practicing teachers possess poor writing attitudes (Florio-Ruane & Lensmire, 1990; Shrofel, 1991; Street, 2003). It is often a challenge for university faculty and staff development professionals working with such teachers to overcome these negative attitudes. Chambless and Bass (1995) suggest that if teacher educators want to influence teachers’ writing attitudes, they must stress process-writing pedagogy in their courses. Current research demonstrates that, indeed, writing attitudes and skills can be changed by effective university courses (Chambless & Bass, 1995; Franklin, 1992; Lapp & Flood, 1985; Stover, 1986; Street, 2003; Street & Stang, 2008). The graduate writing course taken by these participants caused these teachers to both reflect on themselves as writers and look forward to their work as teachers of writing. All participants were highly engaged in the writing process in the course, and most (92%,  $n=23$ ) believed it was a nurturing and sustaining environment in which to develop their own writing skills.

Secondly, these results highlight the importance of preparing teachers within “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Street & Stang, 2008). These data suggest that this course was successful partly because of the constant sharing of in-process writing. Since Lave and Wenger (1991) support the notion that learners learn by doing the task at hand, the participants were in the right setting in which to learn to write. Through this constant sharing, a sense of community developed. This sense of a community is vital to the success of the NWP model of professional development, and to courses such as this one. Considerable research (Bratcher & Stroble, 1994; Lieberman & Wood, 2002, 2003; National Writing Project, & Nagin, 2006; Raymond, 1994; Street, 2003) supports the notion that teachers learn and grow within “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991).



Thirdly, professional development opportunities should support teachers' identities as writers. Clifford and Green (1996) suggest that how teachers feel about their own effectiveness as teachers becomes a significant factor when looking at how they develop professional identities. Since a history of lack of success in writing may diminish a writer's confidence (Bratcher & Stroble, 1994; Mayher, 1990), many teachers are in need of professional development that enhances their identities as writers. As such, this social model of learning in communities of practice provides a foundation for the kind of learning experiences that the NWP supports: namely, that teachers learn to teach writing by writing in the company of supportive and committed colleagues. From this perspective, the ways in which teachers enter a community of practice is tied to their evolving identities as writers. They are acquiring the ways of being writers and teachers of writing.

### **Conclusions**

Considerable evidence exists (Intersegmental Committee, 2000; National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003) to support the notion that writing matters—to educators, business leaders, and to the general public. As reported in *The Neglected "R"* (2003), "writing is everybody's business" (p. 5). It is vital that all students be able to write well; yet this will not happen unless the professional development of teachers across the content areas is improved. Unless teachers feel confident, comfortable, and competent as writers—they will be unlikely to feel equipped to develop their students' writing skills (Bratcher & Stroble, 1994). If the recommendation from the National Commission on Writing (2003) that schools should double the amount of time most students spend writing is to have any chance of coming to fruition, then writing must be taught in all subjects and at all grade levels.

These results suggest that the social nature of learning should be an important consideration when designing professional development workshops or college courses for in-service teachers. This point lies at the heart of the NWP model of professional development (Lieberman & Wood, 2003; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006) and has been recognized as an important consideration by recent writing reports examining models of professional development for writing teachers (National Commission on Writing, 2003, 2005, 2006).

We agree with Lave and Wenger (1991) that the development of identity is central to the development of teachers as writers. If we want teachers to see themselves as members of both writing and teaching communities, we teacher educators would do well to consider issues of biography, self-confidence, and proficiency with writing in our courses. As is evidenced from current research, the writing histories of teachers play an important role in their ability—or inability—to use writing with their students (Bratcher & Stroble, 1994; Chambless & Bass, 1995; Mathers et al., 2007; Pajares, 1996; Pajares & Johnson, 1994; Street, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

### **Future Research**

The basic tenets of the NWP model of professional development need to be examined in future studies. Of special importance is whether or not the NWP model can be successfully adapted by professional development trainers and university faculty to meet the needs of teachers unable or unwilling to commit to the full five-week summer institutes supported by the NWP.

As schools strive to meet the challenge of improving student writing, researchers must also identify relationships between in-service teachers who improve their writing through completion of courses such as the one described here and student outcome data, including writing skills, test scores, and graduation rates.

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