



## **Thinking through Leadership: Voices for the UCLA Writing Project**

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## *Thinking through Leadership: Voices for the UCLA Writing Project*

An Interview with and Co-Written by Jane Hancock, Rebecca Alber, Natalie Irons, and Erin Powers

The UCLA Writing Project (WP) motto is "teachers teaching teachers." This scripted dialogue among three WP Fellows and the UCLA WP Co-Director describes their individual and collective group thinking about their own leadership experiences in the Writing Project and how the WP led to further development of their leadership capabilities.

**Jane Hancock, UCLA WP Co-Director:** We've been asked to write something about leadership. One thing about the Writing Project, is it creates leaders; mainly because of the philosophy that the best teachers of other teachers are teachers.

**Erin Powers, UCLA and UCSB WP Fellow:** That's right. The Writing Project is a model professional development group because it's a great equalizer. It believes that all teachers have great ideas to share. During the Summer Institute, everyone demonstrates a lesson, shares resources around that lesson, and thinks about how it might be modified to meet the needs of other subject areas and grade levels. You leave with so much material to share and a renewed confidence in your abilities – you have no choice but to become a leader. I'm a product of the Writing Project at UC Santa Barbara and when I moved to Southern California, I immediately searched out the Writing Project here. I knew that they would support me in my efforts to continue to learn and share.

**Becky Alber, UCLA and CSULB WP Fellow:** I initially attended the Writing Project in Long Beach, and then the Writing Project here at UCLA. When I began the coaching position, my Writing Project background helped me immensely in my work with teachers.

**Erin:** I went through the project at UCLA also. You can't get enough, can you?

**Natalie Irons, UCLA and UCSB WP Fellow:** I, too, came to the UCLA Writing Project after participating in the South Coast Writing Project (SCWrP) at UC Santa Barbara. I knew I would find resources and like-minded people.

**Jane:** So here we are, Erin, Becky, Natalie, and me. We are all products of the Writing Project, and I don't know about you but I credit the Project for making me the leader I am today.

**Becky:** Me too. And an important tenet of the Project: Write with your students, and work side-by-side with your colleagues. Leadership doesn't necessarily mean standing up in front of a group and saying, "This is how it's done." It's really about being an effective guide on the side.

**Natalie:** I recently read a book by Linda Lambert called, *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement* and she says that everyone has a right, responsibility and a capability to lead. I didn't feel I was a leader until I shared and worked side by side with other teachers during the UCLA WP Summer Institute. That was in 1998 and I'm still a strong advocate for the WP and growing all the time.

**Becky:** Leadership often means being a facilitator of a group's growth, shining a light on their ideas and best practices -- and then building from there.

**Erin:** And a leader takes risks.

**Jane:** What do you mean?

**Erin:** Well, in the Writing Project, everyone is expected to participate. This translates into everyone sharing leadership responsibilities. When it's time to write, everyone writes, even the leader. You don't see that in most professional development programs. Before I participate in something for the Writing Project, there's always a nagging doubt in the back of my mind, *What if I can't think of anything to write, what if I draw a blank?* I take that risk because I know that in the end, I'll be able to do it. It helps me relate to what students experience every day.

**Natalie:** I think experiencing what students do every day in the classroom keeps me mindful that I am always a learner and in that sense leading and learning are reciprocal.

**Jane:** Leaders seek new learning opportunities, always searching for ways to improve.

**Becky:** Yes, being dedicated to growing as a leader and also remaining connected to those constructivist ideals.

**Erin:** And another thing that the Writing Project promotes is the importance of trust. As coaches, we're constantly putting energy into building and keeping trust with teachers just as teachers have to tend to constantly build and maintain trusting relationships with students. If colleagues and leaders can't be trusted, no one is going to want to work with us, just like students don't always perform for teachers they don't trust.

**Natalie:** So I guess as a group, you might say because of the WP, we value teachers, their thinking and our own growth.

**Jane:** Amen!