

# Introduction

It's the last Friday morning in July, and a crowd has gathered for the Robinson Summer Writing Institute's end-of-program celebration. Nearly all of the forty-five students who have completed the three-week program will enroll as ninth graders at Robinson High School in the fall.<sup>1</sup> They occupy the first few rows of the darkened large-group instruction room, known as the LGIR, with their guests seated behind them and their summer teachers standing in the aisles.

On a screen at the front of the room, a presentation begins. Constructed using the free software Microsoft Photo Story 3, it features two slides about each participant. The first slide includes the student's name and photograph; the next slide has the title and a sentence or two from a personal narrative students composed during the program. Soft piano music plays under each student's audiotaped narration of the text, with accents hinting at a wide range of first languages, including Arabic, Kiswahili, and Somali. The audience pays close attention, chuckling and sighing at content like the following:

"Almost Lost It": It was the worst pain I ever felt in my life. It felt like the world's tallest man pulling on it. (Bashiir)

"Flying Colors": I knew he would be mobbed; it's just the way my friends are. They tend to swarm people. (Bethany)

"My First Day of School": I came to the United States and was 16 when I first learned to read. (Ibrahim)

"Lockdown": I guess you live and you learn . . . right? (Kiara)

"One Week, Two Graduates": I could feel the success flowing through the air. I think I inhaled it. (Etan)

Both the titles and the excerpts reveal that students have explored varied topics from their lives, including athletic triumphs and defeats, academic challenges, family trips and migrations, noteworthy performances, accidents and injuries, and adventures with pets. A slide at the end of the presentation invites attendees to browse a complete collection of printed narratives displayed on a table just outside the auditorium. (Student participants will receive a cleanly edited version of their essay to take home in a folder that also includes a certificate, summer reading recommendations, and the URL address for the program's YouTube channel.)

When the last strains of music fade away, the lights return. Pairs of teachers lead guests to the library and two adjoining computer labs for the celebration's next component, during which small groups of students will screen two-to-four-minute movies—digital stories in the parlance of the program—they created with Photo Story 3. Each group identified a topic of interest related to the program's two essential questions (EQs): *Why write?* and *How does writing affect me and the world?* They worked together to conduct internet research and, in some cases, first-person interviews to investigate their topics; author a script for their audiotaped narration; and combine that narration with carefully selected images and music. Now, before their work is seen by an audience for the first time, they introduce themselves and prepare to field questions.

Although the digital stories vary in length and quality, every single one presents new information, addresses an EQ, and harnesses the multimedia capability of the software. Every single group draws on meaningful contributions from each member. And nearly every single kid smiles publicly—some broadly, some a little more subtly—at the warm applause their compositions receive from attendees.

### **Big Ideas of This Book**

For four years, between 2010 and 2013, I was fortunate to serve as the director of the Robinson Summer Writing Institute, working side by side with a committed staff of teachers from Brown Central Schools, a midsize urban district, in an initiative intended to promote writing achievement and engagement for students like Bashir, Bethany, Ibrahim, Kiara, and Etan. I open this book with scenes from the institute's fourth annual end-of-program celebration, because they exemplify some big ideas of the program and of this book, which seeks to highlight the power

of collaborative approaches for teaching writing to youth in diverse, inclusive classrooms. I hope that the story of the Robinson institute will support secondary teachers and school leaders in working together to construct writing pedagogy that responds to all adolescents' strengths, needs, and interests.

First and foremost, the institute was designed as a learning community that balanced the individual with the collective. The presentation of snippets from each student's personal narrative honored their distinct appearances, voices, histories, interests, and skill levels as writers. The instruction preceding the celebration was grounded in our team's commitment to knowing kids well and using that knowledge. Bashiir, a Somali immigrant with interrupted education, needed supports and challenges that were different from those of Bethany, a native speaker of English who had experienced continuous schooling in the United States. Those differences, however, were framed as resources to be leveraged, not deficits to be managed. Bethany and Bashiir explored the same rigorous curriculum and composed their writing in the same focal genres. Each was viewed as having things to learn and things to teach one another. Groupings and opportunities for interaction were designed to maximize heterogeneity and inclusion, not to create levels or tracks in the name of remediation or acceleration. One of my contentions in this book, in fact, is that diverse, inclusive classrooms typically represent the best contexts for all learners to develop writing proficiency, regardless of the labels affixed on them by schools.<sup>2</sup>

The writing institute also foregrounded teacher learning in community. Although the celebration spotlighted student work, it included a moment when the institute staff was recognized as well. That this introduction took place in pairs was no accident, as the work of the previous three weeks (and indeed several months before that) had been relentlessly collaborative, with teachers spending as much time on planning and examining student work as they had interacting with youth. This aspect of the program was discussed only briefly with students and their guests, but it was key to the program's vision from its launch.

Another central argument of this book, then, is that the success that writers with diverse profiles found within the institute depended not just on their collaboration with peers but also on collaboration by adults. Each three-hour instructional block with learners was sandwiched between precise, purposeful planning and debriefing sessions by the full institute team and opportunities for pairs of teachers working closely together to

calibrate expectations and coordinate their approaches. Janice, a Robinson teacher of English and special education and an institute staff member in Years 1–4, explained the relationship between inclusive student success and the unusual degree of teacher collaboration this way:

I thought that the opportunity to collaborate with a group of professionals . . . that have actually had different training and different experiences and come from different places was really powerful. All those voices and all of those thoughts on the table together helped us craft something that was a *good fit for all kids*, not just a specific kind of kid that aligns with a specific type of teacher.

This same idea rippled through interviews with nearly every staff member who worked in the program—a degree of consensus that led me to borrow Janice’s language for the title of this book.

The closing celebration reflects another aspect of the institute that might have been difficult for guests to notice: its status as a space for design-based research. More specifically, my collaborators and I conceptualized the institute from the beginning as a formative experiment, an approach intended to “bring about positive change in education environments through creative, innovative, instructional interventions grounded in theory and guided by systematic data collection and analysis.”<sup>3</sup> As such, many features of the celebration—and the program more broadly—remained consistent over four years, including exploration of both print and digital genres and co-planning and co-teaching by the staff. These features represented what design researchers call essential elements, components of an intervention that are built into the original framework such that changing them would undermine its integrity.<sup>4</sup>

Other aspects of the celebration and the larger program, however, were deliberately adjusted to enhance the experience and improve learning for both youth and adults. For instance, our team’s approach to showcasing students’ personal narratives during the celebration changed significantly from Year 1, when teachers selected a trio of students, all of them native English speakers, to read exemplary texts aloud to the audience, to Year 4, when every member of the multicultural and multilingual cohort was featured. Such adjustments were grounded in careful analysis of varied data sources at multiple intervals: daily, during afternoon planning; annually, between program iterations; and longitudinally, across iterations. The dynamic program yielded by this process over time was

far stronger and more inclusive than the original blueprint delivered with static consistency could have been. Although this is a book intended primarily for practitioners, not researchers, another of my contentions is that practitioner involvement in collaborative research creates better research and better practitioners.

## **What We Know About Writing, Equity, and Inclusion**

Indeed, extant research suggests some sobering historical trends related to writing instruction and achievement for diverse groups of adolescents. Despite the increasing presence of writing in various print and digital forms for many people in contemporary society, writing has been a neglected curricular area in the United States for many years. Legislation such as the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act focused disproportionate attention, resources, and accountability pressures on reading rather than writing. Most secondary teachers receive little formal training to teach writing during their preparation programs, and few experience sustained on-the-job support in this area unless they are lucky enough to have access to an established professional network such as a National Writing Project site.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these trends coincide with writing achievement patterns that leave much to be desired. According to the most recent national achievement snapshot, just 27 percent of eighth graders and 27 percent of eleventh graders scored at or above the “Proficient” level in writing.<sup>5</sup> Even more concerning, the overall scores mask significant achievement gaps for numerous groups that have been traditionally underserved in school, such as English learners, students with disabilities, and students of color. Although these gaps are complicated, reflecting a host of beyond-school factors, including poverty, structural racism, and the politicization of learning standards and tests, differences in instructional practices contribute as well.<sup>6</sup> Both English learners and students with disabilities, for example, have been shown to write less in school and to receive less feedback from their teachers, while low-income students use technology more often for drills and intervention and less often for authentic reading and writing purposes than their more advantaged peers.<sup>7</sup>

These concerning trends may be interrupted, however, by some promising recent developments. The adoption of the Common Core English Language Arts and Literacy Standards in most states, while not

without controversy, has elevated writing, both in English and in other subject areas, from the poor stepchild of reading to an important area of focus in its own right. Documentation of the greater writing demands in many careers and decreased tolerance for disparate outcomes as revealed by data disaggregation have created new urgency to teach all students to write well, not just a select few. And the explosion of interest in structures to develop in-service educators' expertise, including professional learning communities and Japanese-inspired lesson study, hints at new willingness to rethink and revise current ways of doing business in schools.<sup>8</sup>

A growing body of literature points the way to possibility when teachers resist deficit orientations to name, sustain, and extend student writers' varied resources for learning.<sup>9</sup> For example, when individuals with autism who struggle with unreliable oral communication learn to type, they access the general education curriculum and advocate for change in schools and beyond. When low-income African American youth confronted with the gentrification of their neighborhood use participatory action research tools, they become powerful communicators in both print and digital genres. When resettled refugees learning English join online communities, they retain connections to their cultural heritage and identity while developing academic language and literacy. Common enabling factors emerge across the examples, including presumption of student competence, varied purposes for writing, explicit instruction around needed strategies, ample time for composing, and social interaction with peers and teachers.<sup>10</sup> When these conditions are met, writing achievement gaps begin to seem a lot less inevitable for groups that were predictably disadvantaged in the past.

### **Who I Am and Why I Wrote This Book**

I am a former high school English and social studies teacher who now works as a university-based teacher educator. My focus is on preparing teachers who see it as a crucial part of their jobs to help middle and high school students use literacy to learn and communicate in powerful, discipline-specific ways.

I have long believed summer to be an important resource for learning, with some of my most transformational experiences as an educator taking place during that time of year. In my first paid job in education, at the age of nineteen, I served as a counselor and literacy instructor

in a residential summer enrichment program for teens sponsored by the Maine Aspirations Compact. For three years during my secondary teaching career, I directed a summer book club for youth that combined informal discussion of contemporary literature with hiking, playing board games, going to the beach, and other activities. When I moved into higher education, I designed several short-term electives for graduate students that took advantage of summer factors such as reduced curricular constraints and the focus associated with a compressed format. Experiences like these convinced me of the potential for risk taking, skill development, relationship building, and renewal that summer initiatives can present to both teachers and learners.

Another key component of my background is that I have worked for the past twenty years in the Syracuse University School of Education, an institution with a deep, abiding commitment to diversity and inclusion. My literacy classes routinely include students with general education majors such as mathematics and music alongside those studying to be special educators—a mix that enriches everyone. My colleagues, past and present, have contributed to cutting-edge research and advocacy intended to create equitable, vibrant, and welcoming learning communities for all. I have sought to link the institute directly with those traditions.

Last but not least, I have a long history of designing and researching literacy instruction of varying kinds in partnership with K–12 professionals. A number of these projects have been situated in the Brown district, including a one-to-one literacy tutoring program delivered by college students; an investigation of the literacy demands of new, standards-based mathematics curricula for middle and high school; and an inclusive, integrated humanities program delivered by teachers of English, social studies, and special education.<sup>11</sup>

The Robinson writing institute sits at the intersection of these patterns in my professional history. I used insights from each of these experiences to design, direct, and disseminate insights from the program, which was annually the highlight of my academic calendar. Over the years, I have written about numerous program components, including grouping strategies, the nonfiction focus of our writer's notebooks, and how our approaches to co-teaching supported differentiation for varied learning needs.<sup>12</sup> These publications offered a vantage point on what was valuable about the work, but none captured the components' interplay. Consequently, I wrote this book both for myself, to understand how those components fit together and amplified each other, and for others, to

contribute to an ongoing conversation about how to enact an ambitious vision of writing pedagogy in diverse, inclusive settings.

The book is single-authored in the narrowest, most traditional sense of that word. I am the one who sat inside on too many sunny days to generate these particular words, and I am the one responsible for whether they are the right words. But you'll notice as you move through these pages that I use first-person plural ("we," "us," and "our") far more often than I use first-person singular ("I," "me," and "my") to describe the work. This deliberate linguistic choice is intended to represent the joint construction of nearly every good idea you'll find here. As I'll elucidate further in subsequent chapters, what the institute accomplished was always a function of its collaborative design, delivery, and refinement.

### **How the Robinson Story Might Help You**

In addition to the writing I mentioned above, I have made many face-to-face presentations about the institute in classes, at conferences, and during professional development workshops. It's not unusual for these audiences to find the Robinson story fascinating at first but to then begin poking holes in the recommendations I make based on a perceived lack of alignment between the institute context and what many call "the real world" of K-12 schooling. I understand these impulses and acknowledge how institute features such as low teacher-student ratios, the absence of grading requirements, and curricular flexibility have contributed to learning outcomes that are more difficult to achieve in typical schools with more limited resources and competing concerns.

But I've also seen, again and again, that the more people learn about the project, and the more opportunities they have to consider implications for their own professional lives, the easier it becomes for them to imagine changes in their own varied contexts that are informed and inspired by what my Robinson colleagues and students were able to accomplish in a particular space, at a particular time, under particular conditions. From these interactions, I envision three main audiences for this book, each with distinct and overlapping interests.

If you are a school or central office administrator, this book will help you think about structures you could put in place to build capacity for high-quality writing instruction, particularly for students who have traditionally been underserved in school. It will demonstrate the



desirability of seeding, supporting, and studying learning communities among your own personnel rather than purchasing and monitoring the implementation of writing-focused programs designed by others.

If you are an instructional coach or department leader, the book will offer descriptions of facilitation roles you may play and tools you may offer to promote teacher learning with respect to improving writing instruction for all students. It will help you not only to advocate for structural change and needed resources with building and district administrators but also to demonstrate instructional practices you can recommend (or implement collaboratively) with the colleagues you support.

If you are (or will soon be) a classroom teacher, the book will help you adopt, adapt, or refine instructional practices such as fostering inquiry, modeling, and conferring that are proven to support writing success for students with widely varying needs. It will demonstrate ways to collaborate with other adults that will amplify your impact and, perhaps, ease the burdens associated with navigating new mandates and increased expectations on your own. And it will help you make a case to decision-makers in your context for needed time, space, and resources.

With all three constituencies, I hope the book will offer promising possibilities and challenge deficit perspectives about culturally and linguistically diverse students and the adults who teach them. I hope it will demonstrate the value of inclusive settings for such work rather than learning environments tracked and leveled based on perceived ability, language, and disability status. And I hope it will illustrate that creating classroom spaces that are a “good fit for all” is inextricably linked to how we see each other as resources—both adults and students—and how we work together to achieve common goals.

## **How This Book Is Organized**

In addition to this introduction, the book has eight chapters. All eight begin with a narrative vignette in present tense intended to immerse you as the reader in different aspects of the institute as richly and concretely as possible. Some of these vignettes depict whole-program or small-group instruction when students were present, while others portray collaborative sessions during which staff members planned instruction and analyzed student work. My highlighting of both types of interaction in

the openings is meant to signal their equivalent importance in my mind to the success of the project. To emphasize the longitudinal nature of this work, I also chose vignettes from across the four-year time frame.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Robinson context, including an account of the early college partnership in which the writing institute was embedded. It introduces both the teachers and the students who participated in the institute, and it describes the various components of the program. It concludes with discussion of the data sources our team drew on for both program improvement and research findings and makes some preliminary assertions, to be supported more fully in subsequent chapters, about how my collaborators and I judged its success.

The next six chapters represent the instructional heart of the book, and as such, they are presented with parallel structure. Each is divided into two or three main sections illustrated by numerous samples and examples of student work, selected with care to illustrate participant diversity in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, language, disability status, year of attendance, and other factors. Each concludes with a Tips and Takeaways section, in bulleted form, that lists recommendations about how you might implement ideas from the chapter in a school setting and, where relevant, whom you might recruit as allies or collaborators. All six of these chapters are explicit about (1) how my collaborators and I adjusted our approaches as a result of our ongoing design-based research and (2) how we leveraged the affordances of co-planning and co-teaching within a professional learning community to better address students' varied needs.

In terms of content, chapter 2 focuses on collaborative tools and processes we used as staff to design and refine the instruction described in other portions of the book. Chapter 3 addresses our inquiry stance toward writing, with sections on the role of essential questions in the program, particularly with digital stories, and on the "noticings" routine we employed with varied exemplar texts, including those authored by previous youth participants. Chapter 4 describes our use of the writer's notebook as a multifaceted tool to promote writing development in general as well as to support students' production of and reflection on the focal genres. Chapter 5 takes up the topics of modeling and mentoring, with particular emphasis on teachers' process-related "think-alouds" and on invited presentations by a diverse slate of guest writers from the community about how they use writing in their personal and professional lives. Chapter 6 presents conferences as a key site for

enacting our “strengths-first” perspective while offering differentiated support to individuals. Serving as a sort of bookend, chapter 7 revisits the collaboration theme of chapter 2 but this time with a focus on supporting writing-related interactions among students, not just the staff.

At the end of the book, in chapter 8, I discuss themes about curriculum, collaboration, and community that cut across the four iterations of the institute and the accompanying research. Next I describe several initiatives that staff members or I pursued beyond the program that had roots in our shared work within the institute. I conclude with a series of suggestions about how you might apply what you’ve learned from the book to collaborative contexts beyond the individual classroom that matter to you. These suggestions are intended to provide a wider view on institute-inspired change than the more instructionally focused tips and takeaways from previous chapters.