THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE IN A NATIONAL WRITING PROJECT INVITATIONAL SUMMER INSTITUTE

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This qualitative naturalistic descriptive case study provides an understanding of the characteristics of a community of practice within a National Writing Project invitational summer institute. This study utilized naturalistic, descriptive case study methodology to answer the research question: What characteristics of a community of practice are revealed by the perceptions and experiences of the fellows of a National Writing Project invitational summer institute? Data were gathered in the form of interviews, focus group, observations, field notes, and participant reflective pieces. Peer debriefing, triangulation, thick rich description, as well as member checking served to establish credibility and trustworthiness in the study. Bracketing, a phenomenological process of reflecting on one’s own experiences of the phenomenon under investigation was utilized as well. The findings of this study point to five analytic themes. These themes, ownership and autonomy, asset-based environment, relationships, socially constructed knowledge and practices, and experiential learning, intertwine to illuminate the three essential components which must be present for a community of practice to exist: joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire. Participants’ portraits provide a description of their unique experiences as they moved fluidly between the periphery and core of the community of practice.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Professional development is intended to provide learning opportunities which
develop and enhance teacher knowledge and skills, boost careers, present the new
strategies and techniques, and improve student learning and achievement (Speck &
Knipe, 2005). Education reform, over the past few decades, has brought teacher
professional development to the forefront of the discussion on how to improve our
schools and students’ performance. The most recent example is the No Child Left
Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 which stresses the importance of research based high-
quality professional development to ensure that teachers maintain a highly qualified
status which will enable them to meet the needs of their students and ensure that their
students reach high levels of achievement (NCLB, 2002).

Unfortunately, professional development is historically replete with failed
attempts and abandoned approaches to change teacher thinking and to improve
teacher pedagogy (Little, 1993; 1997). Traditionally, professional development is
provided by school districts in the form of one-shot in-service workshops or as a series
of workshops where teachers are exposed to new ideas and practices with little or no
consideration of their needs, interests, or experiences (Little, 1997). Teachers are often
considered passive consumers of this prepackaged or prescriptive knowledge
(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). They feel they have no control or say over what they are
learning or if it is appropriate or applicable for their classrooms. This type of professional
development lacks continuity, coherence, and goes against what we know about adult
learners (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Little, 1997).
Guskey (1994, 2003) reassures us that quality professional development does exist and that just as there is no one right method to ensure student success there is no one right method of professional development for teachers. Just as professional development has taken center stage in the arena of school reform, so too has the research and literature on what constitutes effective professional development. Guskey purports that we know what makes professional development effective, but that coming to a consensus tends to be the issue (1994, 2003). After analyzing 13 studies on effective professional development, Guskey (1994) concluded that there are numerous and often overlapping characteristics that do in fact enhance the effectiveness of professional development, but that the most important component of effective professional development is considering the context in which the professional development takes place. We know that teaching and learning are highly complex and diverse endeavors which are situated in the context in which they are to be used (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The contexts of professional development are as diverse and unique as the teachers who make up these contexts. This must be taken into consideration when developing and planning professional development.

Guskey (1994, 2003) and the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (CCSRI) (2007) agree that as we plan for professional development, along with considering the context, we must incorporate the principles of adult learning. Professional development must be viewed as an ongoing process that is relevant and applicable to the teaching situations and directly addresses and meets the needs and concerns as expressed by the teachers participating in the professional development (Guskey, 2003). We must also allow for and provide time and materials for teachers to
experience firsthand the strategies, techniques, and ideas which should be presented
and shared in a safe and supportive environment as well as providing ample opportunity
to tryout and utilize them within their classrooms. Teachers also need opportunities to
work collaboratively with each other and as teams to provide support, encouragement,
feedback, and to problem solve during the professional development as well as in
follow-up and continuity sessions (CCSRI, 2007; Guskey, 1994). Teachers need to
know that they are valued and accepted for their knowledge, experiences, and varied
perspectives. Finally, we must approach desired changes gradually (Guskey, 2003).
Teachers, as well as schools, need to understand that successful change takes time
and patience.

One model of professional development, “communities of practice,” that has
experienced laudable success in the corporate and business world is rapidly gaining
praise and distinction as effective teacher professional development in education.
Wenger’s (1998) conceptual model of communities of practice brings groups of people
together who share a passion for something they do and through interactions, practice,
and sharing they learn and grow individually and collectively while improving their
practice. While communities of practice are not new forms of learning environments, the
term “community” is quickly becoming the new buzzword in school reform and
professional development, thus running the risk of being overused or misused and
becoming yet another abandoned approach in the search for effective professional
development. Variations on the term “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998) used in
education include professional learning communities (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord,
1997; Morrissey, 2000); educational reform networks (Lieberman & Wood, 2003);
professional development communities (Neves, 2001); collaborative learning communities (Gomez, 1988; Hicks, 1997); and virtual communities (Wasko & Faraj, 2000). These professional development efforts are consistent with the purpose of communities of practice and utilize the tenants of effective professional development identified within the literature to meet the needs of the teachers they serve and tend to show positive results.

The National Writing Project, a successful educational network (Lieberman & Wood, 2003), fosters a community of practice approach to professional development through its invitational summer institute to meet the needs and interests of its participants. The National Writing Project bases its professional development on the principle that “teachers are the best teachers of teachers” (Lieberman & Wood, 2003, p. 8) and values the knowledge, experiences, and expertise that teachers bring with them to the invitational summer institute. The tenets of effective professional development are exemplified through the social practices employed in the invitational summer institute. Valuing and sharing knowledge and experiences; learners taking ownership of their learning; relationships and practice mediating learning; establishing multiple entry points into the community of practice; reflecting on learning; shared leadership; and promoting inquiry among members, all participants of the invitational summer institute to develop norms and routines, reduce feelings of isolation, enhance their professional identities, and bond together as professionals (Lieberman & Wood, 2003).

The National Writing Project brings teachers together who share a passion for writing and the teaching of writing and who through interactions, relationships, practice, and sharing learn and grow thus improving their knowledge and practice (Lieberman &
Wood, 2002). It is the community of practice situated within the context of the invitational summer institute that is of interest to this research study.

Purpose of the Study

In an era of high stakes accountability and the demand for high-quality professional development, the question arises: How can we best meet the professional development needs of teachers so they can in turn meet the learning needs of their students? The answer is not simply to provide effective professional development. There is evidence that effective professional development is already available (Guskey, 1994; 2003). The issue becomes how to engage teachers in effective professional development and meet their needs and interests during the professional development and beyond to promote continued growth. The purpose of this qualitative, naturalistic, descriptive case study was to describe and better understand the characteristics of a community of practice as revealed by the perceptions and experiences of the participants of a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute. By having a better understanding of the characteristics of a community of practice through the perceptions and experiences of those actually participating in the community of practice, those interested in providing professional development will be able to design effective professional development opportunities that will motivate and encourage participants to actively engage in the professional development and continue to be actively engaged members of the community of practice.

Definition of Terms

The following operational definitions are used in the context of the present research study.
Community of practice. A group of people who share a common concern, interest, or passion for something they do and learn to do it better as they interact, practice, and learn from each other. (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002)

Engagement. Committed involvement and participation in the community of practice which enables the participant to negotiate meaning, develop personal trajectories, and reveal and share experiences and histories of practice with others. (Wenger, 1998)

Fellows. Fellows are teachers who are participants in a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute.

Invitational summer institute. A National Writing Project sponsored four/five week professional development effort where teachers K-16 come together to focus on improving their writing, writing instruction, and student achievement through reading, researching, and sharing their experiences and practices. (NWP, 2009)

National Writing Project. The National Writing Project is a nonprofit educational organization that focuses on sustained efforts to improve writing and learning for all learners. The National Writing Project operates in conjunction with colleges or universities in school/university partnerships that provide professional development programs for educators at all grade levels and across the curriculum. The National Writing Project sites develop a leadership cadre of teachers who have participated in an Invitational Summer Institute who deliver customized in-service programs to local school districts, and provide continuity opportunities for their Teacher Consultants. (NWP, 2009)

Participation. Taking part in or sharing in the activities of the community of practice.

Participants. Fellows who agreed to be part of this research study.

Teacher consultants. Teacher consultants are teachers who have successfully completed their participation in a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute and participate in the professional development leadership within their local National Writing Project site.

These definitions are provided to help the reader better understand my intended use of the terms within the context of this study. These definitions are considered as constructs relevant to this research study. At the same time, it is acknowledged that these terms may carry further meanings for the reader.
Research Question

The following research question guided this study: What characteristics of a community of practice are revealed by the perceptions and experiences of the fellows of a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute?

Significance of the Study

As a qualitative study, this inquiry into the perceptions and experiences of the participants of a National Writing Project 2006 Invitational Summer Institute is not an attempt to generalize to the entire population of those who have participated in an invitational summer institute. The intent of this study was to obtain a better understanding of the characteristics of a community of practice in the hope it would help the reader go beyond simply identifying the characteristics of a community of practice and obtain a better and more thorough understanding of the inner workings of a community of practice from the participants’ perspectives. While the characteristics of a community of practice have been identified in the literature, little had been done to fully understand these characteristics from the viewpoint of the participants themselves. It is the voices of the participants that are lacking in the literature on communities of practice.

These findings may help existing communities of practice better understand and strengthen their own community of practice. It is hoped that those interested in providing effective professional development will benefit from this study as they plan, prepare, and implement communities of practice in their organizations, schools, and classrooms. Specific to the local National Writing Project site, which was the focus of this study, the findings of this study stand to inform the leadership on how to better motivate, engage,
and retain members in their particular site and community of practice as well as help members enhance, strengthen, and ensure continued existence of the group.

General Methodology

This qualitative research study utilized naturalistic, descriptive case study methodology (Merriam, 1998) to illuminate the participants’ perceptions and experiences of participating in a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute in order to gain a better understanding of the characteristics of the community of practice. Using case study methodology offered me, the researcher, with a way to examine a complex social phenomenon with multiple perspectives and experiences which resulted in a clearer understanding of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). Data were gathered in the form of observations, field notes, interviews, participant reflective pieces, and other personal writings collected during the invitational summer institute.

Utilizing informal semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) allowed the five participants of this study to share their experiences through natural conversations. After initial readings and coding, emerging categories were presented to a focus group consisting of five fellows from the invitational summer institute, three of which were participants in this study and two fellows who volunteered only for the focus group, to obtain feedback and initial verification of the coding and categories. Data analysis was inductive in nature, thus allowing themes to emerge from the data. Peer debriefing, triangulation, thick rich description, and participant portraits, as well as member checking served to establish credibility and trustworthiness in the study. The methodology is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.
Delimitations

Delimitations for this study describe the boundaries and restricted generalizability of the study (Glatthorn & Joyner, 2005). The context of this study focused on one National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute from which five fellows were the participants. The limited scope of this study allowed for concentrated focus and attention on the participants and yielded thick, rich data and a depth of understanding which would not have been possible with a large number of participants.

Summary

This study examined the perceptions and experiences of five participants of a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute to obtain a better understanding of the characteristics of a community of practice. This study, while limited in scope, is meaningful and informative on many levels and contributes to the discussion on communities of practice as well as teacher professional development. Specifically, this study has implications for directors and facilitators of National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institutes as well as others wishing to foster communities of practice within their organizations, schools, and classrooms.

Chapter 2 provides the reader with a critical review of the literature which addresses the topics of sociocultural, social cognitive, situated learning theories, adult learning theories, empirical research on communities of practice, research on the National Writing Project, and motivation and engagement theories. Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology used for this study. The principles of naturalistic descriptive case study are examined, and the data collection and analysis procedures are presented. Chapter 4 presents the analytic themes revealed in the analysis of the
participants’ reported experiences as they relate to the conceptual framework of communities of practice to answer the research question. In addition participants’ portraits provide a rich description of their unique experiences and give voice to the findings of this study. Finally, Chapter 5 presents the discussion of the research findings along with implications and areas for further research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this naturalistic, descriptive case study was to describe and better understand the characteristics of a community of practice as revealed by the perceptions and experiences of participants from a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute. The National Writing Project was developed as a social network grounded in the belief that learning is a social endeavor. Therefore, I begin this literature review by examining sociocultural learning theories, social cognitive learning theory, and adult learning theories which form the theoretical foundation for this study. Wenger’s (1998) seminal work concerning communities of practice is next beginning with an overview of a community of practice as a collaborative learning model followed by empirical studies on communities of practice which informed and directed this study. Next, motivation and engagement theories were explored as it was important to understand why participants are motivated to participate in communities of practice such as the invitational summer institute and what makes engagement possible. This then leads to a discussion of the National Writing Project and its distinction as a community of practice. Since the focus of this study was on the perceptions and experiences of participants within the context of a community of practice during an invitational summer institute, studies which focus on the invitational summer institute and invitational summer institute as communities of practice were the focus of this examination.
Theoretical Foundation

Sociocultural Theory

Learning theories provide a framework to explain how and why we learn. It is widely acknowledged that learning is a process of knowledge construction in which the learner is an active participant in the development of his or her knowledge construction. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory posits learning or meaning making as a shared experience between individuals which is influenced by the historical customs and materials or tools of the social group within a social context (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; & Wertsch, 1991). Sociocultural theories purport that learning occurs in the social environment and without which the “development of the mind is impossible” (Cole & Wertsch, 2001, p. 4). Key to the sociocultural perspective and important to this study are basic Vygotskian concepts which include the use of psychological tools and semiotic mediation, internalization, and the zone of proximal development (Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Gredler & Shields, 2008; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985).

Psychological tools are cultural signs and symbols which help the learner carry out mental and social activities such as engaging in conversations and problem solving (Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Gredler & Shields, 2008). Examples of these psychological tools include speech, numbers, writing, diagrams, and maps. It is through the use of these tools that learning is mediated. Mediation is an important element in knowledge construction (Gredler & Shields, 2008) and involves the use of tools, systems and people in the transition between the external social experience and the internal mental functions (Goldhaber, 2000; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). According to Vygotsky (1978), semiotic mechanisms are first seen externally or socially as an expert teaches
the learner how to use the tools, then internally as the learner begins to use the tools in activities. In the internalization process, there is a progressive transfer from external social activity mediated by the cultural tools to internal control (Rogoff, 1990; Cole & Wertsch, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978), as Vygotsky stated,

Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice or on two planes. First it appears in the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between two people as an interpsychological category. (as cited in Wertsch, 1985, p. 60-61)

Mediation occurs in both formal and informal learning contexts such as peer coaching, collaborative group work, response groups, hands-on activities, and discussions (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Vygotsky emphasizes, as a context of mediation, the learner’s zone of proximal development (1978).

The zone of proximal development (ZPD), the most popular Vygotskian construct in modern education, is defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 68). In order for the learner to learn within the ZPD, he or she must be engaged in activities that are too difficult to do independently, and the activity must be supported by a more knowledgeable person (Gredler & Shields, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Bruner’s idea of scaffolding paralleled Vygotsky’s thinking that interactions between a learner and more experienced peer or adult could enable the learner to accomplish tasks which were beyond the learner’s independent ability (Bruner, 1990; Wood, Bruner, Ross, 1976). Cazden (1983) defined this scaffolding as, “a temporary framework for construction in progress” (p. 6). It is the
scaffolding of learning that takes place in the ZPD that combines the internal and external experiences.

While much of the discussion about scaffolding revolves around one-to-one interactions, a more recent focus has been on “collaborative scaffolding" (Baines, Blatchford, & Kutnick, 2003; Fawcett & Garton, 2005; Granott, 1993; Gillies, 2006; Nussbaum, Alvarez, McFarlane, Gomez, Claro, and Radovic, 2008). Collaborative scaffolding allows multiple learners to work together in the learning process, therefore obtaining multiple perspectives, gaining insight into others’ learning needs, better articulating understanding, and contributing to a common understanding. In collaborative scaffolding, all learners are seen as being equal with little concern about who is the expert, thus allowing all members to benefit from the shared knowledge created by the group (Baines, Blatchford, & Kutnick, 2003; Eun, 2008; Gillies, 2006). As participants in this study fluidly moved between the peripheral, active, and core levels of participation in their community of practice, they relied on each other to provide this sense of scaffolding, often times not even realizing they were participating in collaborative scaffolding.

This study is grounded within the sociocultural theory because of its emphasis on the importance of culture in social learning. Wenger purports that as individuals enter the community of practice they are immersed into the practice or culture of the community. They learn by doing whatever it is that the community is about, and their identity is shaped and influenced by their participation in the community. It is the essence of immersing the learner into the shared history of the community of practice and sharing what has been created before and the regeneration of meaning making in
the present that gives a community of practice strength (1998). The National Writing Project immerses fellows into the history of its larger community and the writing knowledge base. This immersion process invites the learners to build on this historical knowledge in conjunction with their personal and professional experiences as well as their collective experiences during the Invitational Summer Institute to build their shared repertoire of knowledge.

*Social Cognitive Theory*

Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory is complementary to the work of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory. For both, social interaction plays a fundamental role in cognitive development. While Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory puts the social environment and culture at the center of social learning, Bandura’s social cognitive theory focuses on how people, behaviors, and the environment are inter-related (Pajares, 2002). Bandura (1996) adds attention and importance to observations and modeling that take place within the social setting. Bandura (1977) believes, “most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling; from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action” (p.22). This means that by observing others, people can acquire knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes. Through observing the consequences of others’ actions, learners judge and make decisions regarding the appropriateness of those actions (Bandura, 1977, 1996; Schunk, 1991). Bandura’s (1996) emphasis on learning through observation supports Wenger’s (1998) theory of engagement within the community of practice. As participants engage, usually within the periphery at first, they make use of opportunities to observe the happenings and events
taking place within the community of practice. As they become enculturated into the community, they move closer to the core of the activity. This will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Fundamental to social cognitive theory is the understanding that individuals have innate characteristics which make them human and allow them to determine their destiny in life. These characteristics include the ability to symbolize, engage in self-directedness and forethought, and to self-reflect (Bandura, 1986, 2005; Pajares, 2002). Bandura situates these characteristics as the foundation for his social cognitive theory.

Symbolic representation is a capability unique to humans (Bandura, 1986, 2005). By using symbols, learners understand their environment, problem solve, communicate with others, and gain new knowledge through reflective thought (Pajares, 2002). Symbolization of experiences allows learners to, “provide their lives with structure, meaning, and continuity” (p.3). For Bandura symbols are a means of forethought (1986).

Symbols provide learners with the ability to self-direct and give forethought to their future actions. Learners utilize forethought to plan future actions, anticipate possible outcomes, and determine how to accomplish their desired goals (Bandura, 1986, 2005; Pajares, 2002). If the outcomes of the actions or activities are positive, then the patterns that produced those outcomes are generally retained and used. If the outcomes are not desirable, then those patterns are discarded (Bandura, 1991). The learner’s ability to self-direct his or her learning develops as the learner matures and begins to accept responsibility for his or her learning. This generally occurs through self-monitoring and reflection (Merriam, 2001; Pajares, 2002).
Reflection both inspires learning and is a result of learning. Self-reflection allows learners to, “make sense of their experiences, explore their own cognitions and self-beliefs, engage in self-evaluation, and alter their thinking and behavior accordingly” (Pajares, 2002, p.6). It is through self-reflection that the participants were able to move fluidly between the different levels of participation of the community of practice. As they reflected on their experiences, learning, and knowledge, they determined where they felt comfortable participating and to what degree they allowed themselves to engage in the community activities and meaning making.

**Situated Learning Theory**

As an outcropping of sociocultural theory and consistent with the social cognitive theory, situated learning theory provides a better understanding of the learning which takes place in a community of practice. Situated learning theory is a general theory of learning which has been applied often to adult learning within the corporate world or workplace (Smith & Sadler-Smith, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Education has seen an increased application of this theory as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and cognitive apprenticeship (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989) have gained popularity in teacher professional development (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Moir & Hanson, 2008) and in classrooms (Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996; Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). The basic principles guiding situated learning include creating or negotiating knowledge and information in an authentic context through the interactions of the learner with others and the environment; the use of experiential learning; learner driven rather than teacher driven agendas; and learning which cannot be separated from the
context that reflects how the knowledge will be used in everyday situations (Brown et al., 1989; Heeter, 2005; Lave, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Situated learning places the learner at the center of the learning process (Lave, 1997). The elements of situated learning consist of content, context, community, and active engagement (Brown et al., 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) report that the content must be meaningful and relevant to the learner’s daily experiences rather than arbitrary or prescribed. Learners’ negotiate meaning and understanding of the content through interactions, collaborations, and problem solving opportunities in order to determine the applicability of the content to their situation. The context refers to the environment in which learners construct meaning and consists of relationships, learner priorities, support, learners’ interactions, norms, and the culture or history of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). While the context provides the setting for the experience, it is the community that shapes the learning. Through the community, learners engage in interpreting, reflection, and meaning making. The community provides diverse experiences and perspectives on issues of interest (Brown et al., 1989; Hansman, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger et al., 2002). Community is the connecting and interaction of practice with reflection and understanding to share and shape the body of knowledge which belongs to the collective group (Wenger, 1989). Participation can be defined as the active engagement of the learner with others in and with the resources of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Participation requires interaction, reflection, or practice which results in learning (Wenger, 1998; Wlodkowski, 2003). For this study, legitimate peripheral participation, as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991) was of particular interest. This concept of engagement allows
the learner to participate in the activities of the community as a member, but to withhold and be more observant as he or she becomes comfortable and enculturated into the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This will be discussed more in a following section.

In situated learning theory it is important to understand that, “knowledge is viewed as co-produced by the learner and the situation; engagement of the learner in the situation is critical” (Damarin, 1993, p. 28). Damarin (1993) uses a clever and clear metaphor of the differences between a traveler and a tourist to show the importance of engagement to the potential learning in a situation.

A traveler and a tourist can visit the same city, but experience it very differently. A tourist’s goals are typically to see all the sights, learn their names, make and collect stunning pictures, eat the foods, and observe the rituals of the city. A traveler, on the other hand, seeks to understand the city, to know and live briefly among the people, to understand the languages, both verbal and non-verbal, and to participate in the rituals of the city. At the end of equally long visits, the tourist is likely to have seen more monuments, but the traveler is more likely to know how to use the public transportation. (p. 28)

It is the intention and committed engagement that influences the potential learning and experience for a participant in a community of practice.

Next, I examine adult learning theories as the focus of this study is on adults’ experiences in the context of an invitational summer institute. The literature on adult learning supports much of the literature on communities of practice and the National Writing Project, which are discussed later in this chapter, and is complementary to the learning theories previously discussed.
Adult Learning Theory

Characteristics of Adult Learners

While humans, young or old, are considered learners, we have to acknowledge that adult learners typically have more life and educational experiences than children do. Knowles (1980) introduced his theory of adult learning in 1968. The theory that he advocates, known as andragogy, describes how adults learn, especially in contrast to how children learn. Knowles presents five basic assumptions that describe an adult learner as one who (1) has a self-concept that has moved away from being dependent on others to being able to self-direct his or her own learning, (2) has had many life experiences which can be potential sources of rich learning, (3) has learning needs connected to current and changing social roles, (4) needs to be able to apply learning immediately, and (5) desires to learn because of personal interests and motivation rather than extrinsic factors (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001). These assumptions are the foundation of Knowles’ design model for educational experiences for adults. While it is important to understand how adults learn, it is just as important, from the standpoint of this study, to understand how to develop and provide effective learning opportunities and environments for adult learners. These learning opportunities and environments are explored through the principles of adult learning.

Principles of Adult Learning

As the focus turns to the principles of generating effective learning opportunities and environments for adult learners, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) remind us that learning is not just about the learner, but more importantly the learner within the sociocultural context and the learning which takes place in that context. Learning, not
even for adults, can be separated from the context in which it occurs (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lawler (2003) states, “It is important to take into consideration the characteristics of the adult learner, the characteristics in which the learning is occurring, and the process through which we deliver education and training each time we approach professional development” (p. 17).

Lawler and King (2000) present six principles to guide the development of adult learning opportunities for teachers, “create a climate of respect, encourage active participation, build on experience, employ collaborative inquiry, learn for action, and empower the participants” (pp. 21-22). These principles reflect Knowles’ (1990) conditions for establishing a climate conducive to adult learning as set forth in *The Handbook of Human Resource Development, Second Edition*, where he calls for opportunities for active participation, valuing and validating past learning experiences, a climate of mutual respect, collaboration, support, active inquiry, mutual trust, and openness, as well as the National Writing Project social practices which will be discussed later.

Knowles believes that “people who feel respected are more open to learning” (1990, p.8). A climate of respect is established when the social and physical environments are conducive to adult learning. This occurs when the characteristics, values, goals, and past experiences that learners bring with them to the learning context are acknowledged and valued. This requires knowing the learners, their learning styles, educational backgrounds and experiences, as well as their professional goals (Lawler & King, 2000; Knowles, 1990).
Active participation in terms of establishing an effective learning environment means to encourage the learner to take an active part in the planning and development of the learning which is to take place (Lawler, 1991; Lawler & King, 2000). For Lawler (1991), this requires being respectful of the learners’ needs, interests, and goals. Adult learners are accustom to self-directing their learning and are more likely to actively participate if they have some say and control of their educational activity (Knowles, 1980, 1990).

Adult learners come to a learning experience with a wealth of experiences and knowledge. In order to increase motivation and participation, it is important to utilize learners’ experiences to benefit the individual as well as the group (Lawler & King, 2000; Knowles, 1990). Encouraging learners to share their prior experiences allows others to benefit vicariously (Bandura, 1986) as well as form bonds and make connections with each other. It is important to know and keep in mind that learners cannot be separated from their prior experiences and that not all experiences are positive (Apps, 1991). Such experiences, both positive and negative, according to Apps (1991), can provide valuable learning opportunities and can determine the learner’s engagement or lack of engagement in learning opportunities; therefore, it is important to encourage learners to honestly share their personal and professional experiences.

Because of their many experiences, adult learners are potential valuable resources of knowledge and expertise in collaborative learning efforts (Knowles, 1990). Adult learners need opportunities to work and share in groups and situations with others. Collaborative work has shown to reduce the feelings of isolation often associated with teaching and increases adults’ motivation and learning (Caffarella,
Adults might need to be encouraged to work collaboratively with others as learning has often been seen as a competitive and solitary endeavor (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996). Therefore, it is important learners have many diverse opportunities to engage in collaborative activities with fellow learners.

As discussed earlier, learners need to know that what they are learning is relevant and can be immediately applied to their everyday lives (Knowles, 1990). This occurs when the learner is given opportunities to reflect on his or her new experiences and make connections to existing knowledge (Cranton, 2006). Experiencing learning first-hand and having the opportunity to practice what has been learned also increases the likelihood that the learner will be able to utilize newly acquired knowledge and skills into their lives (Dewey, 1938; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996).

Reflecting on and utilizing newly acquired knowledge empowers the learner (Cranton, 2006), and since the essence of learning is change and growth (Dewey, 1938), then the adult learner must be empowered to do so. An adult learner develops a sense of empowerment by taking responsibility for his or her learning and actively engaging in meaningful tasks which develop his or her competence in performing those tasks. This allows the learner to feel that his or her efforts and contributions are meaningful and have an effect on the community as a whole (Cranton, 2006; Houser & Frymier, 2009).

Adult learning theory supports the way adults learn in the invitational summer institute. As we learn more about the invitational summer institute through the perceptions and experiences of its participants, we can better serve and meet their needs and interests. Participants consistently reported being able to self-direct and
control their learning during the invitational summer institute and valued being given these opportunities as opposed to other professional development experiences where they had little to no input into the learning that took place during the experience. Participants believe that they were valued and respected for what they bring to the invitational summer institute experience and see themselves and each other as valuable sources of knowledge. They report the learning which occurs during their experience at the invitational summer institute as applicable, relevant, and adaptable to their teaching situations and personal interests. They see their experiences as empowering, collaborative, and supportive.

These theories, sociocultural, social cognitive, situated learning, and adult learning, were examined because they form the foundation for the participants’ experiences of a community of practice within the context of the National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute and my understanding of how learning occurs. Next, I examine the seminal work concerning communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) beginning with an overview of a community of practice as a collaborative learning model followed by empirical studies on communities of practice which informed and directed this study.

Communities of Practice

Community of Practice as a Collaborative Learning Model

The concept of “learning communities” in education has strong ties to the progressive era. Thinkers and educators like Eduard Lindeman, John Dewey, and Alexander Meiklejohn had faith in the power of education to improve the individual and society and felt the idea of community was key to one’s learning (Hugo, 2002). Today,
learning communities, or more relevant to this study, communities of practice, while viewed somewhat differently are still seen as key to learning (Cross, 1998; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Printy & Marks, 2004; Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice exist in organizations, workplaces, schools, churches, on-line, and numerous other places. Communities of practice are virtually everywhere.

Lave and Wenger (1991) first introduced their concept of communities of practice in their discussion of the social nature of learning. Of interest to these researchers was how people learned in workplace settings and authentic apprenticeships. They theorized that learning was not about how much or what kind of information one can store in one’s head, but rather a process by which one becomes enculturated into the context in which they learn and work (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning then, occurs as participants of a community of practice interact with others and share their experiences and knowledge (Wenger, 1998).

Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) define communities of practice as, “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p.4). Communities of practice distinguish themselves from other forms of learning communities and networks in that they are self-organizing, designed to improve members’ knowledge about their practice through engaged practice rather than just developing a product or completing a task, and last as long as members maintain interest in the group (Wenger, 1998). Wenger et al. liken communities of practice to ancient guilds where new members to a profession participated as apprentices learning the trade, its unique skills and attributes with and under the guidance and support of
experienced craftsmen within the context of the profession (2002). This apprenticeship model of learning is consistent with the sociocultural learning theories presented earlier where emphasis is placed on the learner being enculturated within the social context and learning occurs through engaging in the experience and observing more knowledgeable others.

Some communities of practice tend to be quite formal in organization while others are more fluid and informal (Wenger, 1998). Whether formal or informal, members of a community of practice are brought together through more than just common interests; a community of practice shares, “expertise, competence, learning activities, discussions, information, tools, stories, experiences, and a knowledge base” (Seaman, 2008, p. 270). In this respect, communities of practice are different from other types of communities because they have a shared practice (Wenger, 1998). A community of practice not only has a shared knowledge base, it also creates, organizes, regenerates, and passes knowledge across the community to all members (Wenger, 1998). A community of practice defines itself along three essential dimensions:

What it is about – its joint enterprise as understood and continually regenerated by its members.

How it functions – mutual engagement that binds members together into a social entity.

What capability it has produced – the shared repertoire or communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed. (Smith, 2003, p. 3)

These three dimensions collectively form a unique and powerful context for social learning.
The joint enterprise is the understanding and continuous negotiation of what a community of practice is about. Wenger (1998) makes three key points about the enterprise of a community of practice.

- It is the result of a collective process of negotiation that reflects the full complexity of mutual engagement.

- It is defined by the participants in the very process of pursuing it. It is their negotiated response to their situation and thus belongs to them in a profound sense, in spite of all the forces and influences that are beyond their control.

- It is not just a stated goal, but creates among participants relations of mutual accountability that become an integral part of the practice. (pp. 77-78)

Joint enterprise is not simply a statement of purpose, nor does it entail all members having the same beliefs or agreeing on all matters. The joint enterprise posits that the community of practice has a collective understanding about the purpose of the work (Wenger, 1998). It is what the community is about. For the fellows participating in an invitational summer institute, their joint enterprise was about writing and all that that entailed. Fellows came together to write, learn about writing, and improve their instructional practices. They had a collective understanding about their purpose in their community of practice.

Mutual engagement defines the community and is the basis for the complex relationships that make a community of practice possible. Members actively engage in activities that matter to them as they work toward developing their shared knowledge base. Productive communities of practice, according to Wenger (1998), must have both diverse and complimentary contributions. Most importantly, in regards to mutual engagement is that all members must be valued and included in all that matters to the community in order to have a sense of belonging and to develop their unique identity.
During the invitational summer institute fellows had numerous opportunities to talk and interact while they worked, ate lunch together, carpooled, worked in various groups and settings, demonstrated their best practices, exchanged encouraging notes, provided critical feedback, and shared their personal writing. Mutual engagement was an essential part of the development of the fellows’ shared practice and community building.

The last component of a community of practice, a shared repertoire, is created through the pursuit of joint enterprise and mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998). The shared repertoire refers to the resources that the community generates through interactions and negotiations which, “includes routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures symbols, genres, actions, or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence” (Wenger, 1998, p. 83). Through working together during the invitational summer institute, the fellows generated rules, procedures, daily logs, personal writing, photo stories, schedules, demonstrations, and celebrations, just to name a few of the pieces of their shared repertoire.

Central to communities of practice is the idea of “practice” meaning that members of the community concentrate on learning that emerges through participation in the practice of the community (Wenger, 1998). In other words, when we learn, we learn to do. Wenger (1998) believes that participation is more than just simple engagement in practice. Participation is, “both personal and social. It is a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging. It involves our whole person, including our bodies, minds, emotions, and social relations” (p. 56). Participation is both a social process and a personal experience, and it is through
participation that members form their unique identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Wenger purports that the experience of identity is not abstract, nor is it a title that is given to someone or a persona that we can simply take on. Identity is a matter of competence within a lived experience. It is a matter of participating in social activities and contributing to the community and its purpose (Wenger, 1998). Many fellows of the invitational summer institute discovered their identity as a writer while actively participating in the writing process. They were writers because they wrote.

Communities of practice are not static. They are fluid entities which encourage members to actively participate at different levels (Wenger, 1998). Wenger et al. purport three levels of participation in communities of practice. Within a community of practice one might engage at the core. The core is “The heart of the community” (p. 56) often shouldering many of the leadership roles and stewarding much of the knowledge and history of the group. Another level of participation is within the active group. Active group members participate regularly in all activities but not with the same intensity level of the core group members (2002). Participating within the periphery of a community of practice, the last level, through what Wenger terms “legitimate peripheral participation” (1998, p. 11) is where most membership begins. Peripheral members participate in most activities but with more reservation or cautiousness, needing to observe the active and core members more, learning and absorbing the ways of the community (Wenger et al., 2002). While it may appear in the above description that core members might be more valued because of their intense participation, Wenger et al. (2002) stress that the peripheral activities are essential for the growth of a community of practice and that the periphery is where a great deal of essential learning takes place. In fact, an active and
effective community of practice invites diversity to ensure that all members within the community of practice are moving in and out of the three levels of participation as they interact, share, and learn with and from each other (Wenger, 1998). It is this constant, often silent, shifting between levels of participation that makes the learning experience powerful for the members of communities of practice. This is evident among the participants of this study as they moved and interacted seamlessly between the various levels of participation in the community of practice during the Invitational Summer Institute.

The ever-changing construct of a community of practice is perpetuated by inviting new members in and allowing older members to move out of the community of practice as desired. A natural entry point into the community of practice, according to Wenger (1998), is by way of the periphery. As periphery members gain competence and confidence in their knowledge and the workings of their particular community of practice, they move inward toward the core. Wenger calls this movement “trajectories” (1998, p. 154). Trajectories arise from intentions and motivations of the member. A peripheral trajectory will not lead to full participation, but does provide the member with access to the community and its practice enough to meet the member’s needs (Wenger, 1998). The member might need ideas or strategies to use, but is not ready or able to commit or give to the community at a deeper level. On the other hand, an inbound trajectory eventually leads to full participation in the practice of the community. These members are invested in sustaining and growing the community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Outbound trajectories apply to members who have been involved within the active or core groups of the community and are ready to move on. This trajectory leads
out of the community allowing others to move toward the core (Wenger, 1998). The trajectories are important to a community of practice in that they create space and purpose for all members. All members, regardless of their participation must be valued and invited to be involved in all things that matter to the community (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).

As stated early, communities of practice exist everywhere. This is certainly evident in the literature. Communities of practice are found in the business world, schools, hospitals, on-line, and numerous other places where people come together for the purpose of practicing and improving the topic or concern that brought them together in the first place (Wenger, 1998). While this study focused on one community of practice made up of teachers who wanted to improve their writing and writing instruction, it was important to look widely at the literature on communities of practice to inform and direct this study. The following is a discussion of the literature on communities of practice as it is relevant to this study.

*Early Empirical Studies as a Research Base*

While examining the literature relevant to communities of practice, it was evident, no matter what the study focus or methodology, most studies dealing with communities of practice took as their research base, as does this study, the earlier empirical studies of Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989), Brown and Duguid (1990), Lave (1982, 1988), Lave and Wenger (1991), Orr (1990), and Wenger (1998).

Lave (1982) became interested in informal learning in the early 1970s by observing apprentice tailors in Liberia. The findings in her study revealed that the tailors’ informal learning went beyond the common skills of constructing garments. They also
learned the culture and intricacies of being a tailor. Her findings sharply contrast the formalized and often isolated instruction seen in schools. Her findings reveal and reinforce that learners gain knowledge through observing, engaging in, and practicing what is being shared by the professional or more experienced teacher of the profession.

Next, Lave (1988) began to focus on problem-solving and learning in everyday cognition by examining students who had received intense math instruction but were unable to utilize these skills beyond their work in the classroom. These findings brought forth the importance of authentic real-world learning opportunities and evidence that learning takes place in the context in which it is to be used (1988), thus supporting her earlier work and solidifying her theory of situated learning theory and foreshadowing the work to come on communities of practice.

Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989), whose primary concern was the obvious disconnect between abstract school learning and real world problem solving, developed a model for the use of situated learning within the classroom. Their proposed model, cognitive apprenticeship, supported methods that “try to encluturate students into authentic practices through activity and social interaction” (p. 37) such as coaching, collaboration, reflection, articulation, and multiple opportunities to practice what is being learned. Their work built on Lave’s (1988) views of apprenticeship and emphasized the value of learning within a social environment.

Orr (1990), an anthropologist, concerned with contexts in which work occurs, studied a community of photocopier repair technicians as they performed their daily jobs. Orr observed that the repair technicians would gather informally to discuss repair problems, issues, and solutions. This troubleshooting and story swapping was vital to
their survival and success in their jobs (1990). The learning occurring in Orr’s technician
group differs from Lave’s (1988) apprenticeships, where novices learn by doing
alongside the expert. In contrast, the repair technicians worked collaboratively as peers
to develop strategies, solutions, and shared knowledge, much in the way that the
fellows do in the invitational summer institute. The repair technicians’ everyday
experiences proved to be more valuable and useful than their limited training and the
often poorly written repair manuals. Orr found that learning is embedded in informal
relationships and interactions and that storytelling and sharing experiences are
legitimate forms of problem solving and meaning making (1990). Most importantly, he
reported that this type of knowledge sharing is a vital part of the work taking place. Orr’s
(1990) study produced a richly detailed portrait of the technicians’ work and provided
evidence that knowledge and practice are tightly connected.

Brown and Duguid (1991), using Orr’s (1990) study as the base for their study,
examined the differences between how people actually work and how organizations
explain the work that is to be done. In examining the results of Orr’s (1990) study,
Brown and Duguid (1991) bring to light how the informal learning which takes place in
communities of practice through storytelling and narrative is often overlooked and
underappreciated, thus agreeing with Orr. They also state that communities of practice
emerge through individuals who collectively engage in shared meaning making and
developing a shared repertoire. With a better understanding of the connections between
learning, work, and innovation, Brown and Duguid find that it is possible to improve
workplace learning and innovation by rethinking and redesigning how organizations
approach these constructs and utilize communities of practice (1991).
In 1991, Lave and Wenger’s *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* sought to understand the ways in which members of a community learn the intricacies of a particular practice. In this work, Lave and Wenger (1991) focused on five cases of apprenticeship (midwives, tailors, naval quartermasters, meat cutters, and nondrinking alcoholics). Their focus was grounded in the concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” (p. 29) where newcomers learn from more experienced others and gradually achieve the competence to participate as full members within the community of practice. Lave and Wenger point out that this is simply not “learning by doing”, it is an “integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in-world” (1991, p. 35). Knowledge is not simply transmitted from an expert to a novice. As learners observe and interact in the community of practice, their identities are changed because they are learning about the practice while becoming a practitioner (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Simply put, from the standpoint of this study, the fellows in the invitational summer institute became writers because they wrote.

These studies (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Brown & Duguid, 1990; Lave 1982, 1988; Lave & Wenger 1991; & Orr, 1990, 1997) mentioned above influenced the thinking and development of Wenger’s (1998) seminal work on communities of practice. In 1998, Wenger’s *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, focused on the developing community of practice that emerged within a group of insurance claims processors. Wenger (1998) discussed the idea of learning as a collective and collaborative effort that benefits everyone participating in the community as knowledge is distributed across the community through mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (discussed in detail earlier in the chapter). He further purports that

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entry into the community of practice is through “legitimate peripheral participation” (p.11), and that participant identity is established through learning about the practice while engaging in the practice (1998). In 2002, Wenger joined with McDermott, and Snyder to shift their focus from theorizing about communities of practice to developing and sustaining communities of practice. Since the authors felt that Wenger’s (1998) earlier work was geared toward an academic audience, their new focus was to provide a “guide for practitioners, built on actual examples that described how communities of practice could be made an explicit part of how organizations work” (Wenger et al., 2002 p. x).

Recent Empirical Literature on Communities of Practice

Since this study’s focus was on better understanding the characteristics of a community of practice through the perceptions and experiences of the participants, it was important to locate and examine literature which sought to focus on the characteristics of communities of practice and the development of communities of practice.

Sim’s (2006) study on pre-service teachers examined the effectiveness of utilizing tutorial groups designed to operate as communities of practice during methods courses in a teaching practicum. These communities of practice were formed based on the expressed needs of the pre-service teachers for opportunities and support to explore, discuss, and reflect on the complexities of their learning during their course work and the realities they faced in their classroom experiences. While this community of practice was developed to support learning during the participants’ course work in the practicum, it was anticipated that these pre-service teachers would utilize the
community of practice model in their own schools and classrooms. Through a survey and open response evaluation, the nine year program showed success and great promise for continuation. According to Wenger’s (1998) criteria for a community of practice, these pre-service teachers came together to share their experiences and expertise, learn from each other, and developed a shared repertoire of resources. This community of practice met the needs of these pre-service teachers by reducing their isolation and confusion by bringing them together to share and learn with and from one another (Sim, 2006). While Sim’s (2006) focus was on a successful community of practice that rose out of the pre-service teachers’ needs for support for their learning during the practicum program, Thompson (2005) examined a once successful community of practice that experienced too much imposed influence from its parent organization which ultimately led to the demise of the community of practice.

Thompson (2005), through observations and interviews, sought to better understand the tensions between an organizations’ attempt to provide “seeding structures,” but essentially implemented “controlling structures” (p. 151) which lead to the destruction of a successful community of practice (2005). The community of practice under investigation, a web-based design agency, was developed by the parent company to compete in the demanding and growing technology market. Unfortunately, the researcher entered the setting after the community of practice had begun to fall apart and had to rely heavily on community members’ perceptions and recollections to build on his observations to document how the demise of the community of practice took place.
The community members, web-base designers, had quickly become a community of practice as they shared a passion for their work and thoroughly enjoyed sharing ideas and working collaboratively on projects. In order to stimulate the creativity of the roughly 40 members, the parent company allowed and encouraged the designers to make the office comfortable and their own. This included an unstructured environment containing “pool tables … table-football, extensive informal meeting areas, and a plethora of company-sponsored toys, from video games to plastic weapons,” as well as “skateboards and scooters” (Thompson, 2005, p. 156) to ride on. According to Thompson (2005), this investment by the parent company proved inspirational, motivational, engaging, and generated strong commitment to the community of practice. This indicated a highly organization-sponsored shared repertoire. The designers were mutually engaged in the joint enterprise as they thrived on sharing innovative and new ideas and worked in collaboration on multiple ongoing projects. Because this community of practice was working so well, the parent company expanded the group from 40 members to 140 members rapidly and non-organically imposing “structured controls” (p.163) such as the distinction between work and non-work, prescriptive practices, emphasis on individual rather than collaborative efforts, and removing many of the inspirational and creative pieces to turn the office into a showroom. According to Thompson (2005), this was the organizations attempt to replicate the success of the community of practice on a larger scale. Instead of successfully replicating the community of practice, members of the design teams began to lose interest and isolated themselves, thus forcing the newcomers to remain within the periphery and unable to
learn with and from the experts in the community and reducing the development of shared knowledge and resources of the group.

Through Thompson’s (2005) discussion it is evident that organizations can and should provide “seeding support” (p. 151) to communities of practice which develop within organizations, but that attempting to implement “controlling structures” (p. 151) will most likely lead to the destruction of the community. This is supported in Wenger’s (1998) thinking that communities of practice are self-organizing entities that need support and outside connections. The organizations, within which these communities of practice develop, should support and encourage, not control the development of the community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Thompson’s (2005) findings and Wenger’s (1998) thinking reflect the philosophy and actions of the National Writing Project as it provides seeding support to its more than 200 sites. The National Writing Project encourages sites to network within and among all of the existing sites by providing multiple networking opportunities within the various state networks and at the national level, yet they encourage each individual site to meet the goals and needs of its members, thus developing the sites identity within the National Writing Project family. The participants in this study discussed how their particular National Writing Project site met their needs and fostered the development of their community of practice, thus fostering their meaning making and the development of their identities as writers and writing instructors.

Dinsmore and Wenger’s (2006) study on a pre-service teacher cohort group revealed a community of practice in the making. The intent of their study was to identify features of a cohort program which supported pre-service teachers’ learning and
understanding of their practice. Unlike Sim (2006), as discussed earlier, these researchers did not set out to establish a community of practice for these pre-service teachers. The community of practice emerged through interactions with each other as they studied to become educators. These pre-service teachers, like most members of communities of practice, began the program with varying degrees of life experiences, work experiences, ages, and differing goals and aspirations for their newly sought career. However, studying to become educators was what initially brought them together. All member of the cohort group were classified as non-traditional college students (Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006).

Through individual interviews, group interviews, reflective statements, surveys, and observations it was revealed that these pre-service teachers developed into a community of practice through “Positive relationships and interactions” (p.60) within their cohort group (Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006). Specific activities were implemented during the duration of the cohort program as experiential learning opportunities to build community within their own classrooms and as effective teaching practices (Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006). These pre-service teachers were encouraged to share their work, lead discussions, and work collaboratively on projects. Also included were opportunities to participate in what Dinsmore and Wenger term “‘house cleaning’ where problems, concerns, and questions about schedules or assignments were discussed to keep students’ stress levels down” (2006, p. 63). These activities proved to be very powerful according to the participants’ reports because they allowed them to openly share concerns and questions in a risk free environment. These activities were deliberately implemented in the program to foster a sense of cohesiveness among the group. What
was not anticipated was the dynamic development of the community of practice as revealed by the pre-service teachers.

The pre-service teachers in Dinsmore and Wenger’s (2006) study revealed overwhelming positive response to the relationships they developed during the program. They reported that the relationships they developed during their cohort experience provided needed support, gave them a sense of belonging, generated feelings of comfort, and led to increased confidence in their knowledge and teaching ability, which allowed them to feel less isolated and more engaged as they entered the classroom. They reported sharing knowledge, skills, activities, and developing a shared repertoire which all members contributed to and benefited from. A sense of being accountable for each other’s knowledge building and learning allowed them to work closely with each other to ensure the success of all members (Dinsmore & Wenger, 2006). These findings are supported by Wenger’s (1998) definition and characteristics of a community of practice.

While the majority of the pre-service teachers had positive experiences during their program and formed a community of practice, not all were able to benefit from the experience. One member of the cohort group left because she felt she was not part of the community and was not learning or motivated to learn within the group (Dinsmore and Wenger, 2006). This brings up the issue of motivation, engagement, and identity within the community of practice, which is of interest to this study, and must be fostered in order for the community of practice to develop and grow. A community of practice should strive to engage all who are interested in the activity and domain of the community of practice and bring them into the periphery. There they have the potential
to learn and develop as part of the community of practice and move toward the core (Wenger, 1998).

*Motivation and Engagement in Communities of Practice*

For Wenger (1998), engagement is a “mode of belonging and a source of identity” (p. 174). Members are generally drawn to a community of practice because of its domain and often possess shared beliefs, but in no way do members of a community of practice have to hold the same beliefs or values. In fact, as stated earlier in this chapter, diversity is an important component for the success of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Wenger acknowledges that members are motivated to engage in a community of practice through personal aspirations and diverse goals (1998).

When the discussion of motivation and engagement arises, Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy is generally part of the conversation. Self-efficacy (Bandura, 1991) is a person’s perception of his or her ability to accomplish a goal or task. If a person believes that he or she will not be successful in performing a task, then the person is less motivated to engage in that activity. Closely connected to Bandura’s concept of self-efficacy, adult learning theories (Knowles, 1990, Lawler & King, 2000), and effective tenants of professional development (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996) are Cambourne’s (2002). Principles of Engagement which propose that a learner is more likely to engage in the learning process if the learner believes that he or she is capable of learning the task at hand, believes that the learning has purpose and meaning, is anxiety free, and respects and trusts the person providing the instruction.

Research also confirms that our emotions influence motivation to learn and that emotions have strong ties to our beliefs, values, and behaviors, in other words, our
culture (Ratey, 2001). Wlodkowski’s (2003) Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching “respects different individual cultures and works at the same time to create a common culture in the learning situation that all adults can accept” (p. 40).

This framework, similar to Cambourne’s principles in many respects, includes:

- Establishing inclusion: Creating a learning atmosphere in which learners and instructors feel respected by and connected to one another
- Developing attitude: Creating a favorable disposition toward the learning experience through personal relevance and choice
- Enhancing meaning: Creating challenging, thoughtful learning experiences that include learners’ perspectives and values
- Engendering competence: Creating an understanding that learners are effective in learning something they value. (Wlodkowski, 2003, p. 40)

Bourdieu (1977, 1993) supports the principles and framework discussed here as relevant and important to effectively motivating and engaging learners in a community of practice. However, he would argue that issues of motivation and engagement are much more complex and reside deep in the learner. His concept of “habitus” is understood as “a generative system of ‘durable transposable dispositions’ that emerges out of a relation to wider objective structures of the social world” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). In other words, habitus is a set of behavioral patterns and habits that the learner acquires through his or her daily experiences and culture. A person’s habitus influences the choices he or she makes and is constantly being reshaped and redefined through the choices that are being made (Bourdieu, 1993). Savery and Duffy (1995) concur with Bourdieu’s (1977) thinking as they purport, “the purposes or goals which the learner brings to the learning situation are central to what is learned” (p.31). They further explain:
When we are in a learning environment, there is some stimulus or goal for learning – the learner has a purpose for being there. The goal is not only the stimulus for learning, but it is the primary factor in determining what the learner attends to, what prior experience the learner brings to bear in constructing an understanding, and basically what understanding is eventually constructed. (p. 31)

In conducting a search of the literature for studies dealing with motivation and engagement in communities of practice, it was evident that there is a need for further investigation in this area. Two studies were located that deal with motivation and engagement in communities of practice. These studies were situated within virtual and distance learning communities of practice.

Wasko and Faraj (2000) explored participant engagement in an on-line community of practice. These researchers conducted a survey of 342 people participating in three self-organizing on-line communities of practice, which operate like live bulletin boards where people post and respond to messages, to determine why people voluntarily share personal knowledge and expertise with other people in their virtual communities. These electronic communities of practice were open to all interested in participating. The knowledge generated in these communities of practice is maintained by its members as they collectively contribute and benefit from the knowledge that is shared and generated (Wasko & Faraj, 2000). The results of this study revealed that people who were motivated by self-interests tend not to be motivated without some type of reward, but those who were motivated by community interests or the domain of the community reported participating and sharing knowledge because it benefitted the community. Wasko & Faraj found that the participants valued the exchange of knowledge with members who had similar beliefs and ways of thinking and understood that multiple minds and perspectives led to deeper understandings and
innovations. The participants demonstrated a sense of reciprocal sharing. They shared their knowledge so that others would in turn share their knowledge. Members were motivated to participate because they had access to the most current knowledge rather than limited or outdated information. Also, participating in an on-line community provided access to information and opportunities to communicate with others that they would not normally have had access to (2000).

While the results in this study were positive and validate the use of on-line communities of practice as effective knowledge developing and sharing opportunities, there were barriers to participating which lessened the motivation to participate by some members. Some on-line participants were reluctant to participate due to a lack of personal confidence or expertise (Wasko & Faraj, 2000), as is similarly found in other forms of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Participants in Wasko and Faraj's study were reluctant to help others if they felt their efforts were not reciprocated, while others feared that their contributions would be attacked or criticized. Size and time also proved to be constraints to participation. Participants reported that vast amounts of information are hard to filter through to determine importance and that participating in an online community of practice can be time consuming (Wasko & Faraj, 2000). In all, this study provided an important look at how successful online communities of practice motivate engagement and participation.

Moller, Huett, Holder, Young, Harvey, and Godshalk (2005) focused on a distance education class which used an online community of practice as it main source of communication and instruction. While they implemented a distinctly different methodology, utilizing pre- and post- attitudinal and motivational tests with control and
treatment groups, their findings were similar to those of Wasko & Faraj (2000). Their results showed that participating in an on-line community of practice has the potential to “increase academic motivation and participation, improving self-concepts and self-awareness, and … have a positive impact on achievement,” (Moller et al. 2005, p. 138). Although the results were positive, no significant difference was found between the control and treatment group as far as attitude improvements or differences are concerned. Moller et al. does however; feel confident that utilizing online communities of practice for distance courses has the potential to be beneficial to all who are involved and generate quality learning (2005).

These studies were informative to the current study in that they illuminated many benefits of participating in a community of practice and how participation increases motivation and engagement.

National Writing Project

Profile of National Writing Project

James Gray established the National Writing Project (NWP), originally called the Bay Area Writing Project, in the early 1970s. Gray, a former secondary English teacher and university professor, concerned with the poor writing skills among entering freshman at the University of California at Berkeley, seized the opportunity to bring together university- and school-based educators to discuss the teaching of writing at all academic levels and across content areas by launching the first invitational summer institute (Gray, 2000). By initiating the Bay Area Writing Project, Gray (2000) created a space for collaborative dialogue – what he referred to as “teacher-to-teacher exchanges, teachers coming together frequently to talk about what they were doing” (p.
These teachers have been and can be described as a “community of scholars” (Smith, 1996, p.691).

Since its conception more than 30 years ago, the National Writing Project has grown from the original Bay Area Writing Project site in California to nearly 200 writing project sites across the United States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. These local sites have collectively served more than 2 million educators and conducted more than 2 million hours of professional development (NWP, 2008), thus making the National Writing Project, “the best large-scale effort to improve composition instruction now in operation in this country, and certainly the best on which substantial data are available,” as Scriven stated (as cited in Gray, 2000, pp. 113-114). Through its professional development network, National Writing Project builds leadership programs and conducts research needed for teachers to improve their instructional practice and help their students become successful writers and learners (NWP, 2008).

Each summer, in every local National Writing Project site, experienced teachers (K-16) participate in what are known as the invitational summer institute. During these four- to five-week institutes, teachers come together to share effective practices from their classrooms, write and share personal and professional writing, and read and investigate current research and theory on writing. Each National Writing Project site is committed to sharing what is known about the teaching of writing from both research and effective practices (NWP, 2009). This commitment exemplifies Gray’s understanding that teachers learn best with and from other teachers (2000).
The National Writing Project does not support a one-size-fits-all approach to professional learning (NWP, 2008; Lieberman & Wood, 2003). A design model that enhances teachers’ natural inquiry processes as they seek to improve their knowledge of writing and their teaching of writing is promoted in every invitational summer institute (Lieberman & Wood, 2002). Since its beginning in 1974, the National Writing Project and its invitational summer institutes have been the focus of many research studies. Research shows that the National Writing Project and its invitational summer institutes increase teacher confidence (Dillard, 2004; Nilsson, 1981), energize and excite fellows to learn and grow as writers and writing instructors (Neves, 2001; Zbikowski, 1992), change teacher attitudes about writing and writing instruction (Detoye, 1989; Dillard, 2004; Levy, 2004), lead to change in instructional methods (Carter, 1992; Dickey, Hirabayashi, St. John, & Stokes, 2003), encourage reflective practices (Calloway, 2003; Whitney, 2006; Zbikowski, 1992), support the development of teacher experts (Calloway, 2003; Levan, 1992; Nilsson, 1981; Neves, 2001), foster collaborative learning (Trent, 1995; Whitney, 2006) and promote teachers as leaders (Calloway, 2003, Pritchard & Marshall, 2002). Studies also show positive effects on students. Findings consistently show improved and increased student writing, and increased academic engagement among students (Dillard, 2004; Hampton, 1990; Nilsson, 1981). The invitational summer institutes hosted by the local sites of the National Writing Project have been labeled communities of practice or alluded to as a community of practice by other names throughout the literature. Lieberman and Wood (2003), among others (Blau, 1993; Bratcher & Stroble, 1994; Stokes, St. John, Dickey, Meyer, Murray, Regan & Senauke, 2008) refer to the invitational summer institutes as professional
learning communities; Neves (2001) labels the event as a professional development
community; Lieberman and McLaughlin (1992) and Darling-Hammond (1998) suggest
that the fellows participate in professional or reform networks; Trent (1995) terms the
event as a collaborative learning community; and still others (Gomez, 1988; Hicks,
1997) simply call the invitational summer institutes learning communities. In more recent
studies (Caswell, 2007; Whitney, 2006) conducted on the National Writing Project, the
invitational summer institutes are referred to as communities of practice. No matter what
the label might be, these are groups of practitioners coming together with a passion and
common purpose to improve their knowledge of writing and writing instruction through
engaging in writing, research, and sharing what they know and have experienced, thus
meeting the Wenger et al. (2002) definition of a community of practice.

In an attempt to better understand the characteristics of a community of practice,
it is important to look at the social practices of the National Writing Projects Invitational
Summer Institutes as described by Lieberman and Wood (2003) in connection with
Wenger’s (1998) essential dimensions of communities of practice: joint enterprise,
mutual engagement, and shared repertoire. The following section links Wenger’s
dimensions of a community of practice and the invitational summer institutes social
practices to further establish the concept of a community of practice existing within the
invitational summer institute.

Connecting Community of Practice Dimensions with Invitational Summer Institute Social
Practices

Wenger’s (1998) belief and understanding that participating in communities of
practice develops shared meaning, reduces isolation, develops a sense of belonging,
and creates new identities allows him to put forth the claim that such participation, “shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (p. 4). The social practices identified by Lieberman and Wood (2003) in their study of two National Writing Project sites also, “convey norms and purposes, they create a sense of belonging, and they shape professional identities” (p. 21). It is by connecting the two perspectives that the National Writing Project’s invitational summer institutes can be viewed as communities of practice. Through observing two National Writing Project sites’ invitational summer institutes, Lieberman and Wood (2003) found that the Invitational Summer Institute operated much like a “writing workshop model” (p. 19). Participants took part in routines of constantly engaging in a variety of writing activities, conferencing, sharing, publishing, researching, and learning with and from each other. Their observations revealed the following set of social practices:

- Approaching each colleague as a potentially valuable contributor
- Honoring teacher knowledge
- Creating public forums for teacher sharing, dialogue, and critique
- Turning ownership of learning over to learners
- Situating human learning in practice and relationships
- Providing multiple entry points into the learning community
- Guiding reflections on teaching through reflection on learning
- Sharing leadership
- Promoting a stance of inquiry
- Encouraging a reconceptualization professional identity and linking it to professional community. (p. 22)
Wenger’s (1998) joint enterprise dimension focuses on what the community of practice is about and what it does. The National Writing Project is about writing, and its invitational summer institutes bring teachers together to learn about writing, improve writing instruction, and become better writers themselves (Gray, 2000; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; NWP, 2009). In order to support participants’ efforts to improve their writing and writing instruction, the National Writing Project values and honors participants’ experiences and knowledge by providing multiple opportunities to share with and teach each other during the invitational summer institute (Lieberman, 2007; Lieberman & Wood, 2003). With this comes the expectation that participants will replicate this approach and treat each other as valuable and knowledgeable members of the community of practice and openly invite and encourage the sharing of experiences and knowledge (NWP, 2008). By collaborating and sharing with each other, learning is situated within the practice of the invitational summer institute and within the relationships being formed thus making the developing collective knowledge base about writing and the teaching of writing accessible to all members of the community of practice.

As participants generate questions and prepare to conduct research in their classrooms, they work in peer response groups and coaching conferences (Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Sparks, 1994) to weave their questions and experiences into demonstration lessons which are presented to the community of fellows during the invitational summer institute. By actively engaging in the demonstrations and generating constructive feedback, the community creates learning opportunities for all involved (Hicks, 1997; Sparks, 1994). These acts of developing inquiry ideas, sharing expertise,
and being vulnerable are valuable components of the joint enterprise of the community of practice as well as the mutual engagement dimension (Wenger, 1998).

The mutual engagement dimension reveals how the community of practice functions (Wenger, 1998). It is what binds the members of the community of practice together into a social group (Smith, 2003; Wenger, 1998). Hicks (1997) and Neves (2001) identify voluntary participation in the invitational summer institute as a key component that binds community members together. The National Writing Project invites participants to participate as fellows in the invitational summer institute (NWP, 2009), thus the name. Participants go through an application and interview process prior to being invited to attend, therefore somewhat generating a feeling of exclusivity and the beginning of a developing identity associated with becoming a member of the National Writing Project (Hicks, 1997; NWP, 2009).

Once fellows accept the invitation to participate in the invitational summer institute, they enter a nurturing and supportive teacher-centered environment (Hicks, 1997; Lieberman & Wood, 2003). Sunstein (1994) suggests that the invitational summer institute environment focuses on teacher development and fosters a sense of professionalism and respect among all members. The structure of the invitational summer institute promotes experiences unlike typical graduate classes or traditional professional development workshops and fellows are considered active participants in their knowledge construction rather than passive learners. They are expected to take ownership of and direct their learning based on their perceived needs and interests (Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Sunstein, 1994). The leadership team, teacher consultants, and the fellows work collaboratively to support and assist each other in their personal
and collective learning pursuits. By utilizing each others’ expertise and knowledge, as they interact and engage in the activities and build the collective knowledge base, fellows discover connections and form relationships which allow them to take risks, open up and be vulnerable in a safe and supportive environment, and become vested in each others’ learning, which in turn deepens their learning and fosters the development and refinement their professional identity (Hicks, 1997; Lieberman, 2007; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Whitney, 2006). This type of engagement encourages and supports the development of the shared repertoire.

Wenger’s (1998) third dimension of a community of practice is the shared repertoire. The shared repertoire provides many of the entry points into the invitational summer institute. Author’s chair, daily logs, daily schedules and rituals, and demonstration lessons are pieces of the shared repertoire most commonly found within all invitational summer institutes (Hicks, 1997; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; NWP, 2009). Daily schedules and rituals set a flexible framework that provide a sense of order during the invitational summer institute, yet are easily adapted to meet the diverse needs and interests of the fellows (Hicks, 1997; Lieberman & Wood, 2003). Through participation in author’s chair, recording and sharing the daily log, and presenting and actively engaging in the demonstration lessons, fellows not only display their creativity, talent, and expertise, they also demonstrate shared leadership (Lieberman & Wood, 2003). The National Writing Project promotes a learning environment where the leadership team and fellows facilitate and guide the invitational summer institute based on the needs and interests of all participating (Gray, 2000; NWP, 2009). This further acknowledges and values the fellows’ expertise and experiences. It is through these social practices, or
“the work” as Lieberman and Wood (2003, p. 31) call it, that fellows are enculturated into the community of practice of the National Writing Project which supports and encourages their continued growth and development as professionals and writers and in turn has the potential to effect the success of the students with which they work.

By overtly connecting the social practices present in the invitational summer institutes to Wenger’s (1998) essential dimensions of communities of practice, it can be concluded that the National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institutes operate and function as communities of practice. With this in mind, it was important to examine the literature on the National Writing Project as it relates to and focuses on communities of practice during the invitational summer institute to further inform and direct this study. A thorough search of studies conducted on the National Writing Project since its conception in the early 1970s revealed limited focused work involving the invitational summer institute as a community of practice. The following is a discussion of the studies which were relevant and informative to this study.

Gomez (1988) focused on the National Writing Project as a model of professional development and its ability to enhance the professionalism of its participants. Utilizing interview guides prepared by the National Center for Research on Teacher Education, Gomez interviewed 10 participants along with James Gray, the founder of the National Writing Project, and the directors of the Bay Area Writing Project. These interviews, in conjunction with Gomez’s personal experience of participating in a 1987 invitational summer institute, revealed three themes: the creation of a community of learners focused on writing, the validation of teacher experiences, and teacher perceptions of opportunities to share their experiences with others (1988). The participants’ interviews
revealed frustrations with isolation, disillusionment, and lack of motivation prior to their National Writing Project experiences and illuminated feelings of “like-mindedness,” “rejuvenation,” and the emergence of a “fraternity of teacher” (p. 8) after participating in the invitational summer institute.

Although occurring prior to Wenger’s (1998) conception of communities of practice, the data in Gomez’s (1988) study revealed a set of practices and rituals which, according to Wenger (1998), could be referred to as a shared repertoire. The data showed that the fellows had, “particular allegiances, qualities of mind, behaviors, or adhering to certain creeds or rituals” (p. 10) which distinguished them from others who did not belong to this exclusive group of writing teachers. Gomez purports that these allegiances, qualities, behaviors, and shared repertoire “build a sense of community” (p. 12) and form the high standards and criteria for admission. This notion of such extreme exclusivity sets up the idea of having rigid and unpenetrating boarders which are in sharp contrast with Wenger’s (1998) notion of voluntarily participating and belonging to a community of practice with flexible and inviting boundaries. These flexible boundaries are intended to attract those interested in the practice of the community’s domain. It is true that the National Writing Project establishes a sense of exclusivity within its invitational summer institutes by holding high standards and criteria for admission, but they are more in line with Wenger’s (1998) criteria for admission into communities of practice. Participants must have a desire to improve their practice as it relates to the domain of the community and be committed to the community’s development and improvement through mutual engagement, the joint enterprise, and its shared repertoire. Communities of practice are inviting and respectful of the diversity brought to
the learning environment by its members (Wenger, 1998). These qualities enhance the learning and professionalism within communities of practice.

The data in Gomez’s (1988) study further revealed an overwhelming sense of increased professionalism and renewed commitment to teaching. The participants credit these feelings to the leadership opportunities during the invitational summer institute as well as afterwards when they returned to their districts and classrooms. The participants were asked to develop and share demonstration lessons as well as take ownership of their learning during the invitational summer institute which ultimately guided the direction of the invitational summer institute. They felt, many of them for the first time, that their knowledge and experiences were valued, appreciated, and solicited, thus making them experts who share their knowledge with others (Gomez, 1988). These types of feelings are consistently seen throughout the literature on the National Writing Project (Blau, 1993; Hicks, 1997; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Neves, 2001; Zbikowski, 1992) and are reflective of the characteristics valued in Wenger’s (1998) notion of communities of practice.

Gomez’s (1988) findings were in sharp contrast, and still are, with many traditional forms of professional development which devalue teacher knowledge and dismiss teacher experiences in favor of passive learning. Gomez charged future researchers to forge ahead and continue to study these developing communities of learners which provide increased professionalism, value teacher experience and knowledge, and develop leadership opportunities which support quality teaching and professional development (1988). This current study has taken such a path and adds to the conversation surrounding professional development and communities of practice as
it strives to better understand the characteristics of communities of practice from the participants’ perspective.

Understanding how communities of practice develop and enhance teacher professional development was the focus of Hicks’ (1997) study. Using her own experiences of participating in the Midwestern Writing Project (MWP) Invitational Summer Institute coupled with observations and interviews conducted with her fellow participants, Hicks compared the emerging themes in her study to learning community characteristics found in the literature. Common themes which arose from her data were rituals, relationships, interaction, expectations, a sense of purpose, reduced isolation, group identity, and time (Hicks, 1997).

As it is with virtually every invitational summer institute hosted by local National Writing Project sites, the fellows in Hicks’ (1997) study had a common purpose for participating in the invitational summer institute. They applied and attended the invitational summer institute to improve their personal writing as well as the writing of their students through improving their writing instruction. Hicks’ (1997) study revealed a developing community of learners which made these improvements possible. This developing community of learners reduced the fellows’ feelings of being isolated in their profession and allowed them to connect with others who had similar questions and needs. MWP, the site of Hicks’ study, invited a diverse group of teachers to attend the invitational summer institute and enculturated them into a nurturing and supportive environment where their knowledge and experiences were valued and appreciated. They had meaningful interactions with each other, developed multiple relationships, and formed their unique group identity as well as bonded with past MWP Invitational...
Summer Institute participants. Directors and teacher consultants who facilitated the invitational summer institute deliberately modeled expectations and shared past experiences and ways of doing things to provide a solid foundation for the new fellows to bond as a community of learners (1997). Most importantly and reported by all of Hicks’ participants was the gift of time. The participants viewed having time to learn, read, write, and enjoy the experiences as key to their experience and the success of the invitational summer institute. Time is also a valuable commodity for Wenger (1998). He purports that time is essential for a developing community of practice. A community of practice does not just happen overnight. It takes time for a community to bond and build their shared repertoire. Without time, members cannot engage and move from the periphery toward the core as learning takes place and the member becomes enculturated into the community of practice (1998). Time was also very important to the participants of this current study and was reported as something they are rarely given in other professional development opportunities. The description of the emerging themes from Hick’s (1997) study is often echoed throughout the literature on the National Writing Project. Participants consistently report having similar experiences during the Invitational Summer Institutes.

Unique to Hicks’ (1997) study was the focus on how the invitational summer institute enhances participants’ professional development. Again, the theme of time in conjunction with intellectual interactions, a collaborative nature, learner-driven and a learner-focused structure, and the learning being relevant to the participants needs and situations were reported to be what enhanced the participants’ professional development. The invitational summer institute, while an intense and fast-paced over
four week period, provided numerous opportunities for participants to read, research, share, and collaborate with each other. For Hicks’ participants, the experience did not end with the completion of the four weeks. The invitational summer institute, as reported by participants, was just the beginning. The MWP site provided continuity opportunities for participants thus enabling them to continue to work and learn together. Relationships and friendships continued to be built and enriched. Participants took their research, new ideas, and strategies back into their classrooms and began to use their experiences from the invitational summer institute to build communities with their students (Hicks, 1997). They did not return to the isolated world they had reported coming from. They reported being empowered with confidence and supported by their invitational summer institute community as they implemented new ideas and continued the work they had begun (1997). Communicating and networking with intelligent colleagues, working collaboratively together, directing their own learning and having the learning focused on their needs along with the learning being applicable and relevant to their teaching were also reported as qualities of the invitational summer institute which further enhanced the participants’ professional development (Hicks, 1997). These specific qualities are consistent with those found in the literature on Adult learning (Knowles, 1990; Lawler & King, 2000) which provides effective learning opportunities and environments for adult learners.

While Gomez (1988) and Hicks (1997) clearly identified common characteristics of communities of practice and how this type of professional development has the potential to enhance the participants’ professionalism and learning, both studies lacked the presence of the participants’ perceptions and voices. Since both researchers were
participants within their own studies, it is their voices and experiences which take center stage and had the potential to bias the discussion and findings. It was important, from the standpoint of this study, to allow the rich stories and experiences of the participants to pervade the discussion in order to develop a better understanding of the characteristics of the community of practice. It is through the participant's experiences that the meaning resides.

Lieberman and Wood (2003), with strong interests in school reform and teacher professional development, understood the importance of examining and learning from one of the most successful educational networks to date, The National Writing Project. They believe that understanding the inner workings of the National Writing Project and why it continues to facilitate and influence educators would help professional development providers present quality professional development and empower educators within the profession to take ownership of their learning (2003). In their study of two uniquely different National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institutes, in two different states, Lieberman and Wood (2003) focused on understanding how participating in a professional community facilitates teacher development and fosters student learning; understanding the key attributes of the sites and the Invitational Summer Institute; how these attributes foster the development of learning and community building; and how each site addresses and responds to the unique needs of its participants. Following the National Writing Projects philosophy of valuing the experiences and expertise of its participants, Lieberman and Wood (2003) utilized teacher portraits to give voice to the experiences they observed during the five week
invitational summer institutes and as they followed these teachers back into their classrooms to observed the effects of participating in the invitational summer institute. As they observed the two invitational summer institutes, Lieberman and Wood (2003) began to see that the professional development took place as a workshop model. Because the National Writing Project’s focus is on the improvement of writing instruction and successful student achievement in writing, they observed fellows actively engaged in writing, collaborating with others, researching, sharing, and experiencing essentially what students in the classrooms experience as they write (Lieberman & Wood, 2003). The participants reported that this type of engagement in writing and learning was an important part of their experience. The National Writing Project’s approach to teaching writing as a social process proved to be a mode of expressing one’s experiences and expertise and a vehicle for developing and learning within a community. Participants were encouraged to reflect upon their understandings, beliefs, and teaching practices and to share their experiences within the context of the invitational summer institute. This process allowed them not only to learn more about themselves, but to open up and learn about each others’ similarities and differences. This allowed the participants to improve their personal writing and their professional practices (Lieberman & Wood, 2003).

The findings from their data show that the participants experienced a set of social practices that encompassed the interactions and activities within the invitational summer institute. Lieberman and Wood (2002, 2003) understood that the social practices were the reasons why participants could participate successfully in the community, created a sense of belonging to something larger than one’s self and his or her classroom, and
allowed participants’ to shape and groom their professional identities. Participants found ways to express their knowledge and create meaning and saw themselves not as individual learners, but as part of a collective entity of professionals (2003). These social practices, as described in detail in this chapter, valuing and honoring teacher knowledge, sharing, discussing and critiquing practices, sharing leadership roles, and enhancing professional identity, according to Lieberman and Wood, “generate teaching cultures very unlike those of typical schools” (2003, p. 22) and traditional professional development. It is this understanding and connecting these social practices to Wenger’s (1998) essential dimensions of communities of practice that enables this current study to better understand the characteristics of communities of practice.

These studies (Gomez, 1988; Hicks, 1997; Lieberman & Wood, 2003) reveal the value and potential impact that communities of practice can have for teacher professional development and warrant more in depth examination and understanding of the characteristics of communities of practice.

**Summary**

The theory and research reviewed for this study suggest that communities of practice, as exemplified in National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institutes as well as other identified communities of practice, provide opportunities for enhanced professional development, increased confidence and competence in participant knowledge and performance, and increased engagement and success. In order to broaden these findings and increase quality professional development for all teachers, it is essential for educators and professional development providers to better understand the characteristics of communities of practice. This chapter reviewed the theories and
literature related to sociocultural, social cognitive, situated learning, and adult theories, as well as communities of practice and the National Writing Project.

The theories grounded within this study, sociocultural, social cognitive, situated learning, and adult learning, solidified my understanding of how, we as humans, learn, but more specifically, how we, as individuals, engage in the learning process. Through the sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978) perspective, learning is understood to take place through immersion in the social aspects of the culture in which the learning is to occur. It is this culture and the history of the group in which the learner is immersed and brought into the conversation and knowledge making of the community of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Bandura’s (1986; 1991) social cognitive theory, while acknowledging the social environment and culture as fundamental elements in cognitive development, emphasizes the individual’s role in learning within the social environment. It is Bandura’s (1991) concepts of self-efficacy and active observations which allow and determine the learner’s ability to engage in the meaning making and learning that takes place within the social context. Situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which is concerned with the learner within the social setting, purports that learning is situated within the context in which it is relevant and meaningful to the learner and cannot be removed from that context. For this current study, that context is the community of practice within the invitational summer institute. Communities of practice and the National Writing Project are supported by adult learning theories because they emphasize the importance of meeting the needs of adult learners by developing atmospheres and environments which are respectful and receptive to the knowledge
and experiences adults bring to the learning situation, encourage and expect adult
learners to direct and control their own personal learning, and insure that learning is
relevant and applicable to the learners ever changing needs and situation (Knowles,
1990).

According to the literature, communities of practice exist everywhere and provide
effective learning environments whether it is in the corporate world (Wenger, 1998),
virtual world (Moller et al., 2005; Wasko & Faraj, 2000), the educational world
(Densimore & Wenger, 2006; Sim, 2006) or the National Writing Project’s Invitational
Summer Institutes (Gomez, 1988; Hicks, 1997; Lieberman & Wood, 2003). While there
was a plethora of information to support the existence and effectiveness of communities
of practice, the literature lacks studies that focus on better understanding the
characteristics of communities of practice. With a better understanding of the
characteristics of communities of practice, specifically through the perceptions and
experiences of the participants who participate in and benefit from, professional
development providers, educators, as well as others will have opportunities to better
meet the needs of their participants and students. It is this study’s intent to provide a
better understanding of the characteristics of communities of practice by utilizing the
rich descriptions of the participants’ perceptions and experiences as experienced during
a 2006 invitational summer institute. The next chapter explains the methodology used in
this study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative researchers cannot assume to know what things mean to the people we study (Douglas, 1976); therefore, it is important to listen to the voices of the participants as they share stories and explanations that evoke the richness of individual experiences. The purpose of this naturalistic, descriptive case study was to better understand and describe the characteristics of a community of practice revealed through the perceptions and experiences of the participants in a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute. As an observer-as-participant (Adler & Adler, 1994; Merriam, 1998) during this 2006 invitational summer institute, my intent was to gain a better understanding of the characteristics of a community of practice through the participants’ experiences and perceptions. For a period of four weeks, I observed 16 women participate in the invitational summer institute.

Since Van Manen (1990) emphasizes that individuals cannot fully understand their experiences while living them, and that individuals can only form complete meaning and understanding by returning to the experiences through retrospective reflections, individual interviews and a focus group session were conducted in the spring of 2008, to thoroughly capture the participants’ experiences, “how they perceive it, describe it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2004, p. 104).

This chapter explains the methodology used to investigate the research question: What characteristics of a community of practice are revealed by fellows through their perceptions and experiences during a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute?
Research Design

This dissertation presents naturalistic, descriptive case studies using phenomenological and descriptive methods and inductive analysis concerning the perceptions and experiences of five fellows who participated in a 2006 National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute. Analysis included both within case analysis as well as cross case analysis. Transcripts of individual interviews and the focus group session as well as written data sources that include reflective statements, participants' personal writings, researcher’s field notes, and researcher’s reflective journal were analyzed.

As an observer-as-participant (Adler & Adler, 1994), I assumed a peripheral membership role during the 2006 invitational summer institute. I “observed and interacted closely enough with members to establish an insider’s identity without participating in those activities constituting the core group membership” (p. 380). My intent was to observe daily routines, events, and the evolving community of practice with minimal invasion or participation. My main focus was to take detailed field notes during organized activities as well as unstructured times to document the obvious and underlying experiences each day. I obtained written consent from the fellows and leadership team to observe and take field notes. At the end of the invitational summer institute, participants were asked to write a reflective statement about their experience during the invitational summer institute to capture their immediate reactions, feelings, and thoughts.

In the fall of 2007, all 16 fellows were contacted and invited to participate in this study. Five fellows volunteered to participate in individual interviews, which took place in early spring of 2008. Interviews were informal, semi-structured, and open-ended
(Patton, 2002) to give fellows the opportunity to share their personal experiences. The fluid nature of the interviews allowed conversations to naturally move back and forth among questions depending on the participants’ responses. The interview guide found in Appendix A lists questions used during the interviews to prompt memories and generate conversations. Audio recordings were made during each interview.

After individual interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed for initial coding, a second invitation was sent to all 16 fellows from the 2006 invitational summer institute inviting them to participate in a focus group session where they would respond to the initial coding and themes which had emerged from the data. Five fellows volunteered to participate in the focus group, three of whom participated in the original individual interviews and two fellows who had not participated in interviews. The focus group session was conducted in the same manner as the individual interviews. It was semi-structured and informal, allowing group members the freedom to express their opinions, reflections, and personal experiences. The use of a focus group provided a social setting which allowed participants to reflect on their experience, generate deeper conversation, and offer more incite and understanding of the experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993; Glesne, 1999; Patton, 2002).

During the focus group, three digital audio recorders were used to ensure that all voices in the conversation were captured. Two colleagues took field notes to capture details the audio recorder could not such as facial expressions and body language.

Rationale for the Design

A naturalistic, descriptive case study design utilizing the framework and investigative tools of phenomenology was the appropriate design for this study.
According to Merriam (1998), qualitative case studies often seek to better understand and describe the nature of a phenomenon and the perceptions and experiences of the participants experiencing the phenomenon being studied. Merriam also asserts that case studies have the potential to reveal unforeseen knowledge about the particular phenomenon under examination (1998). Through this investigative lens, I was better able to carefully and thoughtfully capture the descriptions of what participants experienced and how they understood their experiences (Patton, 2002; Stake, 1981).

The phenomenological practice of bracketing (Patton, 2002) further enhanced my ability to see more clearly the participants’ perceptions and understandings as it required me to make explicit my prior beliefs, experiences, and assumptions about the phenomenon under examination. This also allowed me to view the participants’ perceptions and experiences without prejudgment or premature meaning making. For a complete description of my beliefs, assumptions, and experiences, see the section designated Researcher Experiences Related to the Study.

By setting aside my personal experiences, as much as humanly possible, and being open to hearing the participants’ perceptions and experiences, I was able to paint descriptive portraits of each participant’s experience. This further allowed me to look across the landscape of experiences to capture their shared experience and to illuminate the reader’s understanding of the characteristics of a community of practice.

Research Setting

The invitational summer institute was held in a middle school library of a rapidly growing school district and city, which is approximately 35 miles north of two major, metropolitan areas in north Texas.
The middle school library contained a wide selection of age- and grade-appropriate fiction, non-fiction, reference material, poetry, etc. The library housed a computer lab designed for whole class instruction and a teacher professional resource room. The teacher resource room contained a small refrigerator, microwave, sink, and table. The invitational summer institute fellows used the resource room as their break and lunchroom.

Small tables clustered around a large, drop-down screen and a computer/projector cart were positioned in the largest open section of the library and served as the whole group meeting area. Each small, round table was flanked by four non-padded chairs. Neatly arranged on the table tops were baskets of supplies, National Writing Project brochures, newsletters, university program information, pencils, and a photo holder displaying a single playing card from a deck of cards. The playing cards displayed on each table served as table identifiers, but quickly became associated with the group of fellows who sat at each table. For example, the table which contained the card with the suit of hearts affectionately became known as the “Queens of Heart.” Each table took on a table name. This allowed them to identify with their small table group as well as the larger community of the whole group. Fellows were encouraged to choose a seat as they initially entered the library. Their seat selection became their table grouping for the duration of the invitational summer institute.

The National Writing Project

The National Writing Project began in 1974 under the direction and guidance of founder James Gray with a mission to, “improve the teaching of writing in schools; to provide professional development opportunities for classroom teachers; and to expand
the professional roles of teachers” (Lieberman & Wood, 2003, p. 8). As the National Writing Project grew in success and developed its reputation as the, “most successful educational network in the history of American education” (Lieberman & Wood, 2003, p. 5), it developed a set of principles which guide its growing fleet of more than 200 local sites which span the continental United States and abroad. These guiding principles are:

- Universities and schools are better able to improve students’ learning if they work in partnership.
- Teachers are key to educational reform.
- Teachers are the best teachers of other teachers.
- Writing deserves constant attention from kindergarten to the university.
- Exemplary teachers of writing are themselves writers. (Lieberman & Wood, 2003, p. 8)

By utilizing these principles, each site maintains the quality of professional development established more than 30 years ago and maintains a sense of flexibility to meet the diverse needs and interests of its participants (Lieberman & Wood, 2003).

The Local National Writing Project Site

The local site of National Writing Project, which is the focus of this study, is affiliated with a university in the north central part of Texas. Faculty members from the reading program in the College of Education serve as leaders of this site. This National Writing Project site began in 2003 as a response to the needs of north Texas administrators and teachers for professional development related to writing instruction, cross-curricular reading/writing connections, and a need for culturally responsive instruction. This site holds annual invitational summer institutes, advanced institutes,
and a range of other professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators in many rural, suburban, and urban districts in the north Texas area. To date, this National Writing Project site has held seven invitational summer institutes resulting in approximately 120 teacher consultants.

The site’s leadership team is comprised of 12 members who meet quarterly to plan events and ensure the site is progressing toward its goals. The leadership team meets regularly with the its advisory team, which is made up of representatives from surrounding school districts, members of the university faculty, and the site’s teacher consultant leadership team to ensure the local site is meeting the needs of the school districts and teachers it serves. The roles and responsibilities of site’s leaders are represented on the sample site map in Appendix B.

Invitational Summer Institute

Over 200 National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institutes are held annually across the United States and are attended by experienced teachers. These teachers spend one month, during the summer, demonstrating effective practices for teaching writing, studying research, and improving their knowledge of writing by writing themselves (NWP, 2009). After successfully completing the invitational summer institute, teacher consultants are invited to move into leadership roles and conduct project-sponsored professional development programs with a focus on improving student achievement through developing teacher knowledge (NWP, 2009).

A teacher interested in attending the invitational summer institute must complete an application and interview process prior to being invited to attend an invitational summer institute. Applicants represent a diverse population from Kindergarten through
high school teachers from urban, rural, and suburban school districts. These teachers have a range of experience from one to twenty plus years. Most local sites offer graduate credit for successfully completing the four-week invitational summer institute. For some, the invitational summer institute is their first graduate school experience and others are well into their doctoral work, but seeking a degree is not a requirement for participation in the invitational summer institute (NWP, 2009).

The 2006 invitational summer institute, the site of this study, was held from June 6 through June 29, 2006. Participants met Monday through Friday from 8:30 AM until 4:00 PM. A total of 16 summer fellows, all women, participated in the 2006 invitational summer institute. A typical day of the 2006 invitational summer institute began promptly at 8:30 AM with fellows writing in their Writer’s Notebooks. This was followed by the reading of the daily log, a creative recap of the previous day’s events and happenings. Next on the agenda was Author’s Chair. Author’s Chair provided fellows with opportunities to voluntarily share pieces of personal writing. Other daily routines consisted of read a-louds, text discussions, writing and reading response groups, demonstration lessons, research and coaching opportunities, and community building activities. Time was scheduled everyday for unstructured reading, research, and writing, and each day ended with an activity referred to as “Ah-ha moments.” This was a structured time for individuals to reflect on what they had learned throughout the day, be it trivial or profound. This was often reported by the fellows as one of the highlights of the day.

Throughout the four weeks, fellows participated in Writing Marathons, which were activities where the fellows ventured out of the confines of the middle school library to
bond and write. The fellows referred to Writing Marathons as field trips. Fellows were also treated to guest speakers and special presentations throughout the four-week invitational summer institute. Every Friday, fellows participated in a Read Around by sharing a finished piece of writing with the entire group. Within this one month period, fellows were responsible for completing certain assignments and tasks to fulfill their graduate credit requirements. Fellows were required to submit three personal pieces of writing ready for publication, a 90-minute teaching demonstration, a research project which addressed a professional “Burning Question,” a one-page handout overview of their research project which was presented to the other fellows, and an annotated bibliography of books and articles selected and read during the invitational summer institute. On the last day of the invitational summer institute, the fellows had a celebratory Read Around to commemorate their hard work and accomplishments. Friends, colleagues, and family were invited to celebrate with the fellows. For a breakdown of the daily events, see the sample weekly calendar in Appendix C.

Gaining Entry

Gaining entry into the 2006 invitational summer institute was not an issue since I had been an active teacher consultant and member of this particular National Writing Project site and leadership team since I participated in their first invitational summer institute in 2003. I made the decision to step out of my leadership role during the 2006 invitational summer institute so that I could focus my conscious efforts on my role as researcher. I was present everyday of the invitational summer institute and participated in daily activities and routines on a limited basis. I was not involved in the decisions
made related to planning or implementation of events during the 2006 Invitational Summer Institute.

Participants

Sixteen women with varied backgrounds related to teaching service years, personal and professional experiences, and teaching positions were fellows in the 2006 invitational summer institute. All 16 women were formally invited to participate in the study. Six fellows responded to the invitation. After explaining the study commitments and responsibilities, one fellow decide that she could not participate in the study due to prior commitments. The five remaining volunteers became study participants. During the interviews, participants were asked to provide background information. A brief profile compiled from information the participants revealed during the interviews is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Grade Level(s)</th>
<th>Subject Areas</th>
<th>Degree(s) held</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andi</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>English/Reading</td>
<td>BA in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lori</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>World Geography</td>
<td>BA in Composite Social Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandi</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3rd/K</td>
<td>Self-Contained</td>
<td>BS Interdisciplinary Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laci</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Self-Contained</td>
<td>BS Interdisciplinary Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holli</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3rd/4th</td>
<td>Self-Contained &amp; LA/SS</td>
<td>BA in Elementary Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Confidentiality

As required by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB), each participant signed an informed consent document, and all field notes, audio tapes, transcripts, and archived data have been kept in a locked file cabinet. To protect the identity of the participants, each person has been given a pseudonym. Any names of schools, school districts, universities, and any other people mentioned in the study have all been changed to ensure confidentiality.

Role of the Researcher

For this study, I took the role of observer-as-participant (Adler & Adler, 1994; Merriam, 1998). Everyone present at the invitational summer institute was informed of my research activities and that my participation in the group was secondary to my role as researcher. Taking this stance allowed me to interact closely with all members of the invitational summer institute to establish an insider’s identity yet not participate in activities reserved for the core participants.

Consistent with the philosophy of phenomenology, I had to have an inside perspective to be able to completely understand the meaning my participants made from their experience (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). In other words, I had to have experienced the phenomenon under examination. I brought my own experiences from my participation, as a fellow, in this local site’s 2003 invitational summer institute and experiences, as a leader, from each of the subsequent invitational summer institutes held by this site. In the role of observer-as-participant, I was able to experience the 2006 invitational summer institute with my participants.
As a precursor to data analysis and to enhance my ability to better understand the experiences of my participants during the 2006 invitational summer institute, I engaged in bracketing or Epoche which is the process by which, “the researcher looks inside to become aware of personal bias, to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material … gain clarity about preconceptions (Patton, 2002, p. 485). I had to make explicit my personal views, beliefs, assumptions, and experiences and set aside all preconceived experiences, as best as I could possibly do, to allow me to better understand the experiences of the participants in this study (Patton, 2002). The following is my attempt to bracket my experiences so that I could turn my attention to the words and stories of the participants rather than impose my assumptions and experiences on their experiences. I approached this process in a manner similar to the individual interviews. I basically answer the same questions I asked my participants. This allowed me to obtain a picture of my experiences, beliefs, and biases.

Researcher Experiences Related to the Study

After teaching fourth grade for four years and earning a master’s degree, I began experiencing feelings of frustration, isolation, and being underappreciated for my knowledge and experience. My perception of the school and district administration’s focus, at the time, was on students passing “THE TEST,” not on learning to be effective writers and enjoying the process. I believed I was an effective teacher, but had little opportunity or access to quality and meaningful professional development outside the university classroom. I believed that I was not the only teacher experiencing these feelings and that there had to be something more for me. My journey to find answers and solutions began when I decided to pursue at terminal degree in reading.
During the university application process, I received an email invitation to participate in a 2003 National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute. This opportunity included a scholarship that paid my tuition for the first six hours of graduate credit toward my degree. Honestly, the scholarship to attend the invitational summer institute and receive six graduate hours made it very easy for me to commit a month of my summer vacation to professional development. This was an invitation that I could not refuse. I filled out the application and submitted my sample writing lesson then anxiously awaited a response. The anticipation and excitement of meeting other teachers who enjoyed writing was almost unbearable. I knew nothing about the National Writing Project, this particular local site, or what they had to offer, but I was eager to get started.

The first invitational summer institute for this National Writing Project site began on June 4, 2003 in a north Texas middle school library approximately 40 miles away from the partnering university. Everyone made a lengthy commute to attend the invitational summer institute. I left my family at home, commuted more than 100 miles to stay with my parents during the week, and still had to drive an additional 40 miles each day to attend the invitational summer institute. Needless to say, I was committed. This experience proved to be a life-changing experience for me. I arrived early the first morning a little unsure of what to expect but eager to get started. I was convinced that everyone else would know more, have more experience, and definitely be better teachers than I was. I spent the next four weeks with seventeen fellows and two professors sharing personal experiences, writing, learning about writing and writing
instruction, conducting research, and discovering that we all have something to offer and something to learn.

On the surface, the fellows had little in common. We came from different districts, backgrounds, experiences, content areas, and grade levels. Our differences are what made this experience so interesting and appealing to me. We all had a strong interest in learning about writing and writing instruction. That is what bound us together as we got started. Spending eight hours a day together for the next twenty days provided opportunities to get to know each fellow better and develop working relationships, respect, trust, and personal friendships with each other. Our differences became binding strengths.

The atmosphere of the invitational summer institute was an important component for building a sense of trust and safety for me. Being away from the university setting made this experience less like a class and more like a professional workshop, but not a workshop I was accustomed to experiencing. I quickly forgot that I was working on assignments for a grade and focused on engaging in discussions, sharing my writing and ideas, and collecting information, strategies and ideas from others. There was a feeling of freedom from assignments and due dates and a concentration on figuring out what I was interested in learning. I had the time to read and explore topics which I was interested in learning. There was little pressure to commit or conform to one idea. Products and finished pieces were the result of ideas, sparks, interests and heart-felt experiences. I wanted to and was compelled to write and share.

Knowing that I would be sharing my personal and professional writing publicly was both intimidating and comforting. I worked hard to make my writing as polished as it
could possibly be, not for a grade but because I was sharing it with people who cared about what I had to say – the fellows. Was this always easy? No. But it was bearable because we were all sharing. These people cared about me and my writing. They gave critical feedback to help make my writing better. It was often hard to put my raw feelings and thoughts out to be heard, but any effort was always accepted and appreciated. I now understood what my students felt when faced with a daunting writing assignment. I had experienced their writing pain and frustration. I wrote in my journal,

I never thought it was important for me to be a writer as long as I knew how to teach writing. Now I see how important my writing is. Although my response group gives good feedback, it is painful to show it [my writing] to them for the first time, but I’m learning to trust them. I’m developing empathy for how my students feel when they sit down to conference with me. Writing is not easy. Showing it to someone is physically painful (TP/Reflective Journal/June, 2003).

The atmosphere generated by the leaders allowed me to feel comfortable and build and gain trust with others. Other ways the leaders provided an atmosphere conducive to learning and community building was though resources and food. Since the invitational summer institute did not take place at the university, and we were in a middle school library with limited research resources to support our work, the leaders brought a plethora of professional books on reading, writing, and teaching from their personal libraries as well as the university library. The leaders were also instrumental in guiding me to additional resources and materials to aid in my research and writing. Upon request or as they saw the need, the leaders provided other materials our community needed to be successful and productive: paper, sticky notes, pens, markers, note cards, etc. Their actions made me feel comfortable and valued. I began to bring items to foster and support our work and experience. I brought note cards to write messages of encouragement and thanks to fellows. Small trinkets such as bookmarks
and pens were given in appreciation for others’ help and assistance. I brought professional books and children’s literature to aid in my work and to share with others who might need them. The experience was not about finishing my work and getting a grade. The experience was about learning and growing. It was about sharing and helping others to be successful. It was a collective experience. As I reflect on these experiences, I realize I was experiencing what Csikszentmihalyi (1997), terms “collective flow.” I was so immersed in the collective activity that boundaries and distinctive roles and labels began to disappear. This flow, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1997) and Coleman (1998) opened the path for my development and growth, both personally and professionally and was fostered through having multiple social opportunities to interact and create meaning with others.

Food played a huge role in the invitational summer institute for me. I love food. Food provides comfort and joy, helps me connect with others, allows me to celebrate, and console myself. Food is a powerful uniting force for many people, and it was a major component during the invitational summer institute. The food at the institute went from simple snacks of crackers, chips, and nuts to elaborate homemade offerings and family recipe exchanges as the institute progressed. Food helped build and strengthen our community and nourished us throughout the long days. I found that I could retreat from my work with a snack whenever I needed to and there was always someone else there to share a conversation with. This provided informal opportunities to get to know the other fellows and leaders better. I believe food satisfies and meets many needs on different levels, and it certainly did that for me during the invitational summer institute.
The leaders provided a supportive atmosphere and tone which encouraged community and confidence building. They accomplished this by demonstrating and modeling their expectations and by participating as valuable and knowledgeable members of the invitational summer institute. Because this was the first invitational summer institute for this National Writing Project site, the site leaders were learning along the way with us, and it was clear to me that they would not ask us to do anything they were not willing to do themselves. Was this just good teaching? Yes, but it was more. They were important members and contributors to the invitational summer institute, my experiences, and the development of our community of practice. They wrote when we wrote. They shared when we shared. They researched information and shared sources which supported and allowed me to find my own interests and direction. Although we were a group with common goals, we were also treated as intelligent individuals with unique needs and interests.

Conversations were individualized and advice was offered in a way that made me feel comfortable and important. I never felt obligated to do anything in a way other than my own way. For me, that was possibly the biggest obstacle I had to overcome. I had to be the person in control of my learning. I had the freedom to make choices and guide my learning. Yes, I had to turn in three personal pieces, do a demonstration lesson, and write a position paper, but these were only guidelines which guided and enabled me to focus on my learning and interests. The fellows and leaders were there to serve as sounding boards, resources, and offer support. Everyone was there for the same purpose – to learn more about writing, writing instruction, and to share our experiences. In the end, I learned a great deal about me. I found this experience
invigorating, exciting, and challenging. This was an atmosphere I had not experienced before.

Sharing ideas was an important component of the invitational summer institute for me. I entered the invitational summer institute uncertain that I had anything new or different to offer. I was certain that everyone else knew more and had more experiences than I had. My goal was to learn as much as I could. Sharing was not something I usually felt comfortable doing. At first, I wanted to sit back and take it all in. It was quickly evident that sharing was not an option. It was vital. I participated in Author’s Chair, Read Arounds, demonstration lessons, and shared my one-page research handouts. All of these activities required me to share my experiences and personal writing. Sharing started immediately. The first morning, and every morning after that, I was invited to write in my journal. This was a journal that I was instructed to select carefully. It was to be a journal that reflected who I was. After journal writing all fellows were invited to share in the Author’s Chair. This was an opportunity to share something rough and often unfinished, something we wanted to get off our minds, or something we wanted to try out on our audience. It could be a story, poem, a thought, or just an observation. It was also an opportunity to get to know the fellows better and make personal connections.

As effective teachers do, Lucy, the site director, shared first. She reduced my fears, modeled her expectations, and relieved the tension in the room by being the first to take the risk. On that first morning, I nervously shared how uncomfortable and uncertain I felt about being at the invitational summer institute. The sharing that followed showed me that I was not the only one with these feelings. The bonding had begun.
This initial sharing led to more conversations about insecurities and uncertainties at individual tables. The three people at my table, Cindy, Erin, and Kim, were the three people I came to depend on and expect the most from during the invitational summer institute.

As time went on and the more I shared, I began to feel more secure, less vulnerable, and much safer within the walls of that middle school library. I trusted and relied on these fellows, my community, to be careful and sensitive with my feelings and my writing. At the same time, I expected them to provide honest, critical, and constructive feedback, and in return they expected the same from me. There were different levels of sharing and different expectations. These expectations were made clear by the leaders and were respected and followed by the fellows. Author’s Chair was a place to share stories, make connections, pose questions and ideas for later discussion, try out something new, and ask for feedback and comments. Author’s Chair was a voluntary and informal forum even though it was part of the daily routine. I was encouraged to share but not required to share. This made it fun and exciting for me. Author’s Chair was my favorite part of the day.

Message bags or mail bags provided an opportunity to share private thoughts and messages of encouragement and appreciation with each other. It was like writing notes to your best friend in high school. Message bags were made from small brown paper lunch sacks decorated to express who we were. They were displayed in a row on top of a bookshelf in the library. Most people utilized them by writing a note after a demonstration lesson and when someone made a personal connection with something someone had shared. This became very important to me. I looked forward to checking
my bag daily to see what might be in it. I cherished the comments, notes, and little surprises that were left in my bag. The thank you notes, personal connections, and encouraging messages made me feel good about me, my efforts, and my contributions to the group and individuals. These messages let me know that what I had to share was important and what I had to offer made a difference for someone. This was very personal for me.

Read Arou...
mates. We spent much time together working on group projects, providing feedback, helping each other with our demonstration lessons, having casual conversations, joking around, and just getting to know each other as women and teachers. I relied heavily on my table mates for support and encouragement. No one knew me better than they did. I wrote in my journal,

No matter what, I can count on my cabin mates. They are strong women, confident teachers, wonderful writers, and as funny as hell. I love being with them, sharing with them, and am a better person because of them. Never before have I had so much fun or shared so much with a group of people who just 10 days ago were total strangers. On some level I feel like we have been friends for a lifetime. This experience is way more than professional development. How lucky am I!!! (TP/Reflective Journal/June, 2003)

Other relationships developed over the course of the invitational summer institute. My response group became trusted colleagues who told me how they saw it (or heard it) in response to my writing. They were different than my table mates and saw my writing through a different lens. They provided critical feedback that was not always easy to hear but necessary to hear. That was the agreement we made when we were assigned as a response group – we would be honest and tactful but not afraid to say what we felt. We agreed to listen with an open mind and a supportive heart. I wanted to make my writing better and realized to accomplish that I had to be open, honest, and willing to hear advice. This was a powerful group for me. I had to be willing to hear and also willing to give and that required commitment. Their feedback gave me the tools, strength, and confidence to share personal experiences and events that I had not shared with anyone before. We were vested in each others’ success and struggles, but I never felt as personally connected to them. These relationships were more professional. I attributed this to our roles in the group. To give such honest feedback, we had to
remain and act as professionals. This did not make the relationships or connections less meaningful, just different.

The invitational summer institute fostered many relationships. Some developed through working on projects together, eating together, or sharing similar interests. Some were beginning or working relationships that would last throughout my program at the university and beyond. Several of the relationships developed into personal friendships that I see lasting a lifetime. Some only lasted the duration of the invitational summer institute, but were meaningful and important to my experience and growth during that month.

We, as a group, were there for a common purpose or at least a similar purpose, but everyone had insecurities and doubts. I wrote a poem titled *My Harshest Critic*, which consisted of quotes from conversations with fellows about our insecurities and doubts. This poem illuminated the similar feelings, questions, doubts, and vulnerabilities among group members. I knew I was not alone. Knowing that allowed me to get into the flow and be present in the moment of the invitational summer institute, learn from my experiences, and enjoy being with this group of people working and learning together.

As I have alluded to, the National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute was not a typical teacher professional development opportunity for me. First, everyone who participated volunteered to participate and made a commitment to be present everyday for the entire month. Participants made this commitment for different reasons, but ultimately, as I learned through conversations and actions, we were there for a common purpose – to learn about writing and to improve our writing instruction. I immediately began making connections because these fellow learners seemed to have
teaching beliefs and practices which aligned with mine. This had not been the case for me at my school. I felt like I had found my place. This was the place I belonged, and I was energized, supported, and respected. This was the place which allowed me to share my experiences, issues, and successes, as well as learn from others who shared their experiences. This was the place that made me feel comfortable, safe, and appreciated. This was the place where I began to grow.

By attempting to make my perceptions of my experience during the 2003 invitational summer institute explicit, I became aware of presuppositions and biases that might cloud my vision to what the participants report their experiences to be. As a reflective practitioner and researcher, it was important to make explicit what I learned through the bracketing process. The following are what I learned about myself, my experiences, and potential influences on my work in this study.

My experience during the 2003 invitational summer institute was positive and productive and validated many of my beliefs and actions as a learner and teacher.

The invitational summer institute operates as a community of practice and is a valuable and effective form of professional development.

Learning is a social process situated within the context in which the learning takes place.

Learners are ultimately in charge of their learning and the direction in which they choose to pursue their learning. I am one such learner. Within one learning environment, I can engage at different levels of participation/engagement to meet my personal learning needs.

I learn best in an atmosphere where I am respected and valued for my experience and knowledge and not pressured to conform or perform.

I learn best when challenged and encouraged to guide and direct my own personal learning experiences.
The bracketing process was important in that it allowed me to make the distinction between my learning and the learning of my participants. I was able to see that everyone’s experiences are different, and the experiences I brought with me to the invitational summer institute allowed me to learn and grow and come away from the experience differently.

Data Collection

Data collection began with field notes that recorded observations of the daily events and happenings of the National Writing Project 2006 Invitational Summer Institute, which consisted of a total of 18 days of activities. For a description of the daily events, see Appendix C for the sample daily schedule. Interviews were conducted and audio taped from late January 2008 through early February 2008. The focus group session took place on April 17, 2008. Two colleagues assisted in taking field notes and recording the session so that my attention could be on facilitating the focus group session. All audio tapes were transcribed within 24 hours of the interviews and focus group session. Other written data used during this study consisted of daily logs, reflective statements, participants’ personal writings, and my researcher’s reflective journal, all of which were collected during the invitational summer institute.

Data Analysis

Borrowing from Creswell’s (1998) method for qualitative data analysis, I began the analysis of data by reading through interview transcripts to acquire a feeling for them. The second reading focused on highlighting all significant statements including phrases and sentences that directly pertained to the phenomenon (characteristics of a community of practice) being studied and the research question. I made notes in the
margins of the transcripts, as well. The third reading consisted of gathering non-repetitive, non-overlapping units of analysis into meaning units (Creswell, 1998) so that I could begin to see emerging categories which represented and reflected the characteristics of Wenger et al. (2002) definition of a community of practice. The next round of analysis involved clustering these meaning units into categories common across all participants’ descriptions. At this point, I took my initial categories from the analysis to the focus group session.

The focus group consisted of three fellows who participated in individual interviews and two fellows who participated in the 2006 Invitational Summer Institute but did not participate in the interviews for this study. The focus group participants were given the data prior to the session and asked to read over the initial findings and to be ready to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and reactions during the focus group session. After reading, rereading, reflecting, and the discussion within the focus group, I returned to the literature on communities of practice to search for connections between participants’ descriptions of their experiences and the literature. In doing so, I was able to make connections between what the participants reported and Wenger’s three dimensions of communities of practice. This allowed me to utilize Wenger’s (1998) three dimensions of a community of practice as macro codes and adapt his characteristics of these dimensions as micro codes. For a list of these codes see Table 2. These codes are defined in the coding dictionary located in the Appendix D.
Table 2

*Macro and Micro Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mutual Engagement</th>
<th>Joint Enterprise</th>
<th>Shared Repertoire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engaged diversity</td>
<td>Negotiated enterprise</td>
<td>Style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>Mutual accountability</td>
<td>Stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Rhythm</td>
<td>Artifacts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community maintenance</td>
<td>Negotiated Response</td>
<td>Actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Historical events</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity.* (p.73). by E. Wenger, 1998, New York: Cambridge University Press.

The next stage of analysis consisted of coding the original interview transcripts using the macro- and micro- codes. Once the coding was complete, I was able to cluster the coded units of analysis into five themes that reflected the three dimensions of a community of practice. These five themes are discussed in detail in the next chapter. I then went back to the original interview transcripts to validate the interpretations and gather verbatim quotes to illustrate the five themes.

I included participants’ reflective pieces, which were written at the conclusion of the 2006 invitational summer institute, as well as my observational field notes in the data analysis to corroborate participants’ reported experiences and actions during the invitational summer institute. See Table 3 for a timeline of data collection and analysis.

Table 3

*Data Collection and Analysis Timeline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 2006</td>
<td>Observed Invitational Summer Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collected field notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Video recorded daily events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 29, 2006</td>
<td>Collected reflective statements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(table continues)*
### Table 3 (continued.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 7, 2007</td>
<td>Sent invitations to all fellows to participate in research study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2008-February 2008</td>
<td>Conducted individual interviews with participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 22, 2008</td>
<td>Interviewed Andi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 24, 2008</td>
<td>Interviewed Brandi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 28, 2008</td>
<td>Interviewed Holli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 8, 2008</td>
<td>Interviewed Lori</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 11, 2008</td>
<td>Interviewed Laci</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2008-March 2008</td>
<td>Read, coded, analyzed interview transcripts – first time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 17, 2008</td>
<td>Conducted focus group meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2008-June 2008</td>
<td>Analyzed data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2009-June 2009</td>
<td>Re-immersed self in data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Debriefed with peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developed themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Debriefed with peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Developed participant portraits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2009</td>
<td>Verified accuracy of interpretations through member checking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2009</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Credibility

Credibility and trustworthiness of this study were established on several levels. First, as my work with the National Writing Project began prior to the 2006 invitational summer institute, I have extensive connections with this local site and its participants. I have been involved in the National Writing Project in a variety of capacities including fellow, teacher consultant, researcher, and invitational summer institute co-director. My prolonged engagement with this local site provided me with a thorough understanding of the invitational summer institute and the process in which participants were engaged. Additionally, the presentations and conversations during the 2006 invitational summer institute were digitally recorded daily, allowing me the opportunity to go back and review the activities of the invitational summer institute, if needed.
Second, data in this study has been triangulated through different sources and methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Source triangulation included interview transcripts, reflective statements, field notes, and artifacts resulting from participants’ work. Method triangulation was established through the use of a variety of methods to collect data including interviews and observation.

Third, peer debriefing (Erlandson et al., 1993) was utilized during the analysis and interpretation process. As I analyzed data, I consulted with two colleagues. One, a National Writing Project teacher consultant, reviewed my codes and checked utterances for code verification. The other, a doctoral student with not background knowledge of the National Writing Project, reviewed initial categories and participated in code verification. I also utilized the focus group participants in verification of the initial categories.

Fourth, portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) were used, as a form of thick description, to paint vivid pictures of the participants’ experiences and illuminate their perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation. Each portrait was created to stand alone and tell only that one participant’s story, but woven together these portraits invite the reader into the gallery of the collective experience. Lastly, member checks were conducted with each of the five participants to ensure accurate interpretations of the data and construction of the portraits.

Summary

In summary, this chapter provided a detailed description of this study’s research methodology. Phenomenological and descriptive methods were utilized to describe and understand the characteristics of a community of practice as revealed by the
perceptions and experiences of the participants of a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute. Five fellows from a 2006 invitational summer institute participated in this study. Data-collection methods for this study included individual interviews, field notes, and archival data. Emerging categories were reviewed against relevant literature to formulate five themes. Credibility and trustworthiness were accounted for through various strategies including triangulation, peer debriefing, thick description, and member checking. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study with details that support and explain each finding as well as portraits to give voice to the findings.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

The purpose of this research was to better understand and describe the characteristics of a community of practice as revealed by its participants. The following question guided this study: What characteristics of a community of practice are revealed by the perceptions and experiences of the fellows of a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute? The findings in this chapter point to five analytic themes revealed in the analysis of the participants’ reported experiences as they relate to the conceptual framework of communities of practice. These complex and interconnected themes come together to support Wenger’s claim that the three essential components of a community of practice are: joint enterprise, mutual engagement, and shared repertoire. In addition, participants’ portraits provide a rich description of their unique experiences and give voice to the findings of this study. These themes illuminate the characteristics identified within the context of the invitational summer institute, and at the same time highlight the participants operating fluidly between the periphery and core of the community of practice as they negotiated their place within the invitational summer institute. The differences that made a difference for each participant regarding her ability to engage and participate in the community of practice are also highlighted.

Discussion of the Analytic Themes

Data analysis revealed five themes in relation to the research question. These five themes follow:

• **Ownership and autonomy**: Participants expressed that they had ownership and autonomy over their learning during the invitational summer institute. They
determined what direction they would take their research and writing based on their interests, goals, and experiences.

- **Asset-based environment**: Participants perceived their experiences as being in a supportive environment focused on assets. They reported feeling safe, comfortable, accepted, and valued for their knowledge and experiences as a result of the planning, decisions, and actions of the leaders.

- **Relationships**: Participants reported that relationships were an important component to their experience. These relationships were receptive, validating, engaging, supportive, respectful, nurturing, and mutually accountable. The participants believed that these relationships mediated learning.

- **Socially constructed knowledge and practices**: Participants revealed sharing personal experiences, issues, practices, and knowledge with others as well as others sharing with them as an important part of their learning.

- **Experiential learning**: Participants reported experiential learning during the invitational summer institute as valuable and important. This learning provided opportunities to develop empathy for what their students would experience, as well as built their confidence and competence as writers and teachers.

The following is a detailed description of the analytic themes utilizing quotes from participants’ interview transcripts and reflective statements. This allows multiple participants’ perspectives and perceptions to illustrate the complexity of the findings within the phenomenon under investigation. All participant quotes are verbatim and grammatically represented as they were spoken. Verbatim quotes are cited with a coding scheme which allows for easy identification and location in the data. These
Ownership and Autonomy

All participants expressed that they had a sense of ownership and autonomy over their learning during the invitational summer institute, as Andi stated, “I was able to be reflective, to look at what I needed, what I was interested in and then pursue that. It was not ‘this is what it is and you will learn it this way’” (AW/Interview/353-355/10/2009). In order for a community of practice to exist and build a common body of knowledge, it must invite diverse thinking, experiences, and goals (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). By encouraging participants to pursue their “burning questions” and personal interests, the invitational summer institute supports the necessary diversity, sharing, and relationships that make up the mutual engagement component necessary for the existence of a community of practice as well as developing the shared body of knowledge of the community of practice. Laci further exemplified the idea of pursuing personal interests and having control over one’s own learning when she said,

The freedom to decide what I want to research and how I wanted to write it up and present it was a little overwhelming at first, but man it was empowering. We weren’t told what to do. It truly wasn’t about product, but about process. That made me a better and stronger learner. (LD/Interview/85-89/2/11/08)

Ownership and autonomy were not exemplified in the sense that participants isolated themselves within their own interests and research to complete work and assignments; the opposite occurred. Fellows sought out the knowledge of others to
assist in their learning, as Brandi explained, “It was great. I could talk to the leaders for ideas and direction and also to other fellows for their experiences and understanding. We all had similar interests. You know it is all about writing. So what they knew helped guide me” (BC/Interview/68-71/1/24/08). It is within the asset-based environment that these fellows directed and pursued their personal learning which in turn added to and developed the shared knowledge base of the community of practice.

Asset-based Environment

The participants’ perceptions of an asset-based environment were paramount to the development of the community of practice. The participants credit the asset-based environment to the planning and decision making of the leaders of the invitational summer institute and found it to be in sharp contrast to the typical deficit-model professional development which they all reported having previously experienced. The foundation of a community of practice is to situate the learner at the center of the learning, while valuing what the learner knows, cares about, is able to accomplish, and wants to pursue. The asset-based environment established in the invitational summer institute supported collaborative and actively engaged learning as well as addressed multiple learning styles. This environment met both the cognitive and physical needs of the participants. Holli stated,

It wasn’t like going to school or any other professional development. It was fun. We had food – good food. We were comfortable. They provided a library of books for us to use and we had everything we needed so we could concentrate on learning, reading, writing, and research. They really took care of our every need. (HD/Interview/73-78/1/28/08)

Laci echoed this sentiment when she described the invitational summer institute environment as “my home away from home during that month. I brought personal things
and just moved right in. I felt safe, valued, cared about, and was eager to be there” (LD/Interview/ 820-822/2/11/08). Participants were encouraged to make themselves at home and feel comfortable.

The comfortable, home-like feeling was reflected in how the leadership team set up the middle school library. Tables were rearranged and clustered to form intimate meeting places and quite working retreats. Food was kept in a central location and replenished daily to encourage informal gatherings and conversation. Resource materials and supplies were easily accessible and plentiful, as Laci recalled, “I could not believe all of the supplies we had. I love writing supplies” (LD/Interview/448-449/2/11/08). The participants reported that the atmosphere of the invitational summer institute was nurturing and accepting. They felt valued, as Lori articulated,

I wasn’t sure what I would have to offer, you know being a social studies teacher in a room full of language arts teachers, but I was pleasantly surprised. They accepted me, wanted to hear what I knew. They valued me and my teaching experiences. (LB/Interview/112-117/2/8/08)

The participants also reported that the Invitational Summer Institute accommodated many learning styles. Laci recounted,

Everything about it [ISI] totally spoke to me. I am a very move to the next thing kind of gal. That’s why I like second grade, cause we move quickly. Everything goes move, move, move, and I love that about the institute. We came in and journaled, then shared, then moved right into demonstrations. We had our routine. It wasn’t too long or too short. It matched me perfectly. (LD/Interview/63-70/2/11/08)

Andi felt that the institute provided for different learning styles as well, “The teaching demonstrations really showcased individual styles and abilities. We received so many different perspectives and great ideas and participated in many different ways. Lots of learning modalities” (AW/Interview/563-566/1/22/08). The Invitational Summer Institute
clearly established an asset-based environment which valued diversity, prior knowledge and was committed to making participants feel comfortable, safe, and accepted which in turn enabled them to interact and learn within the community of practice.

Relationships

Relationships were a major component during the invitational summer institute for these participants. These relationships were opportunities to connect with each other, build professional and personal relationships to varying degrees and levels, and to mediate learning. Holli summarized her experience when she said,

We called ourselves fellows. It was a fellowship because you were there with people who wanted to learn and wanted to be there, and it was just nice to have that. People felt the same way, you know. I could share things with them. Things you wouldn’t share with normal strangers, because basically when we showed up, we were strangers and after talking and working with them we weren’t strangers anymore. You could share deep personal stuff you normally wouldn’t share with people you've only known for four weeks. (HD/Interview/55-64/1/28/08)

Other participants had similar feelings. Andi noted, “These were not your typical four week friendships. It felt like we had been friends for a lifetime,” (AW/Interview/227-228/1/22/08) and “These are the people I count on to keep me going,” (LD/Interview/70-71/2/11/08) added Laci. Relationships were characterized as opportunities to talk and connect with others, as Holli said, “I liked my table group. We were very different personalities, but it was great to get to talk and listen. We learned we had a lot in common” (HG/Interview/79-81/1/28/08). Relationships were often described as times to share stories and experiences, offering fellows a way to feel both connected with others and less isolated in their profession.

Additionally, fellows reported feeling that relationships contributed to their belief that they were part of something larger than one’s self or one’s classroom. Andi stated,
I don’t know if it was because we were a community of like minds, and we had a common purpose or if it was the intense setting or the level of commitment you have to have going into it, but there was a different level of trust, a different kind of understanding, something I’d never experienced before. It was something bigger than me, bigger than my world. It was a network of professional teachers who got it and got me. (AW/Interview/139-148/1/22/08)

Relationships were seen as opportunities to socialize, vent, and be with adult learners who were committed and trustworthy. Friendships and long-term relationships frequently developed among the fellows. These perceptions align with Lieberman and Grolnick’s (1996) notion that participating in a community of practice creates a sense of belonging which encourages relationships to form and develops trust that supports participants sharing ideas and opening up their practice to others. Relationships were where the learning took place for these participants during the invitational summer institute.

**Socially Constructed Knowledge and Practice**

“What allows members to share knowledge is not the choice of a specific communication, but the existence of a shared practice – a common set of situations, problems, and perspectives” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 25). It is the sharing of practice that has the potential to generate knowledge in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Essential to meaning-making, as reported by all participants, were multiple opportunities during formal activities and social times to share personal experiences and practices. Socially constructed knowledge and practices were characterized by participants as opportunities to share successes and failures, gain different perspectives on varying topics and issues, talk about writing and teaching practices, and talk about students and student learning. Laci described her feelings about the demonstration lessons, “There was always this realness. People shared the good and bad. What
worked and why. No one tried to be a know-it-all. We all learned from sharing our experiences” (LD/Interview/672-674/2/11/08). Holli echoed this experience when she said, “We had different ideas. We certainly had different experiences. But it wasn’t about having the right answer. We shared our experiences so we could learn” (HG/Interview/616-618/1/28/08).

Participants expressed an appreciation for opportunities to interact with other fellows who faced similar issues and problems in their teaching, “It’s good to know I am not alone in this. That I’m not the only one having writing issues. That right there made it all worth it,” (LB/Interview/117-119/2/8/09) Lori recalled. They also noted the value of being able to talk and share with fellows teaching at different levels – elementary, middle, and high school. Laci found, “It was important to get that different perspective. It was important to make connections across grade levels and see how much high school and elementary had in common” (LD/Interview/654-657/2/11/08). The participants described these interactions and opportunities as contributing to their meaning making and community building. Andi added to Laci’s sentiment when she said,

> It wasn’t just about building friendships and having something in common. It was about teaching and learning from each other. We moved in and out of those roles by sharing. We had an opportunity to make our own meaning. (AW/Interview/447-451/1/22/08)

Having opportunities to open up one’s practice for others to view and critique through the sharing of experiences and practices can create a sense of vulnerability, as Brandi expressed, “The teaching demonstrations were interesting and intense. Having others give critical feedback was hard to take, but it helped you know how to make your instruction better and helped me plan my demo” (BC/Interview/117-119/1/24/08).

Participants also reported that the socially constructed knowledge and practices had
immediate impact on their knowledge and applicability to their teaching. Lori said, “It was like magic. I could see how it was done. I knew it worked in her classroom, so I knew I could adapt it to my classroom” (LB/Interview/196-198/2/8/08). Lori also expressed that socially constructed knowledge and practices required time to digest and reflect on what was shared and how it would best be utilized, “I needed to stop and kind of digest what we had learned and go from there. There were so many great ideas” (LB/Interview/194-196/2/8/08).

The time and structure to come together to socially construct knowledge and examine practices played an essential role in the community of practice, as Holli explained, “They gave us a lot of time. We had response groups, table groups, and just free time too. We had a lot of time to share. It is definitely the time we needed. That’s what we don’t get often” (HG/Interview/540-543/1/28/08). Little (2003) emphasizes that sharing and discussing personal practices with others creates opportunities to learn from and with one another, thus strengthening the claim that sharing promoted and helped develop the shared repertoire of the community of practice. Clearly, the opportunity to engage and interact with colleagues in and around their practices was perceived as an important factor in the community of practice.

*Experiential Learning*

Participants reported experiencing “learning by doing”. Having the opportunity to experience the writing process and writing activities that their students are asked to do, proved valuable to the participants of this study. These experiences helped develop empathy and built confidence and competence in their writing knowledge and instruction. Holli explained her experience,
I really like the fact that we really got to learn, but it wasn’t in what you would think – like a classroom or a ‘sit and get’ workshop. It was fun for me. It was learning by doing. It was doing what I ask my kids to do. It was fun. Now I understand their [students’] pain. (HD/Interview/65-68/1/28/09)

Lori added,

I would never be able to use this stuff in my classroom if I hadn’t done it myself. It would have been another one of those things I just put up on the shelf. Doing it gave me the confidence to do it with my students and I could tell them ‘It works’. (LB/Interview/199-202/2/8/08)

Participants also viewed the experiential learning that took place during the invitational summer institute as applicable and adaptable to their instruction and could implement it immediately. Brandi stated,

I felt like we were a part of this group and we weren’t being taught or talked at. We were actually doing it. You could see immediately how you could use it in your class and how to adapt it. I was amazed that I could take something from high school or fourth grade and make it mine and use it in Kindergarten. (BC/Interview/127-129/1/24/08)

Having the opportunity to experience the shared practice and finding ways to adapt this new learning into their classrooms gave these participants greater confidence in not only their teaching, but their knowledge as well, as Andi stated, “Doing it gave me all the confidence in the world. I knew it would work” (AW/Interview/388-389/1/22/08). Laci’s words resonated with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) Situated Learning theory of learning by doing,

There was so much writing. There were some many teaching ideas. There were so many personal and professional ideas, but it didn’t seem like I had to put a lot of forced effort into learning. This learning seemed effortless. I was so engaged and it was so meaningful and I could apply it because I did it. (LD/Interview/464-469/2/11/08)

Situated learning was a key component in the community of practice, because as the fellows articulated, they came together to practice and improve their practice.
Taken individually these findings are of interest from the standpoint of learning more about the components within the domain of a community of practice. Mutual engagement was represented through the participants’ descriptions of socially constructed knowledge and practice, experiential learning, relationships, and an asset-based environment. Joint enterprise was represented in the participants’ descriptions of socially constructed knowledge and practice, relationships, an asset-based environment, ownership and autonomy of learning, and experiential learning. Shared repertoire was represented through the participants’ descriptions of socially constructed knowledge and practice, relationships, an asset-based environment, ownership and autonomy of learning, and experiential learning. But woven in the rich description of the participants’ experiences these findings revealed a vivid picture of the necessary and complex components of the community of practice within the invitational summer institute. The following section paints these portraits.

The Portraits

In this section the data will be presented in the form of portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Portraits capture the voices of the participants to highlight and interpret the experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon under examination. Each of following portraits is a narrative drawn from the data that represents each one of the participants in this study. These portraits focus on each participant within the context of the invitational summer institute, which is the focus of this study, and provide evidence of the characteristics which make up a community of practice from each participant’s perspective. The value of each theme for each participant reveals a continuum in which each participant places herself within the community of practice. This is supported by
Wenger and Lave’s (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation and Wenger’s (1998) levels of engagement.

Andi

Having only taught for three years, Andi was searching for something to improve her writing instruction, “It just wasn’t jelling, and I wasn’t satisfied at all and the kids were less than enthused” (AW/Interview/41-43/1/22/08). Her search was one that took her outside of her school district. She had participated in the professional development that her district had to offer, but she found she wasn’t making the necessary connections to feed and sustain her desire to use writing effectively in her classroom. Fortunately, according to Andi, she knew the right people. Sheri and Julia, teachers in her English department, shared their experiences of participating in the 2005 invitational summer institute and sparked her curiosity,

I knew there was something there and I couldn’t understand it. Then when they would tell me, ‘I just can’t explain it.’ It was so frustrating because they could not explain it. I was looking for something and I knew there was a lot of work and a lot of writing to it [ISI], but I was kind of ready for that and I needed that push to figure out what it was I believed, and a lot of the things they were saying I would just be nodding my head, yeah, yeah, and saying, ‘you are right. I believe that too.’ So they introduced me to the National Writing Project and the summer institute and that is why I applied. (AW/Interview/55-66/1/22/08)

When asked to talk about her experiences during the invitational summer institute she replied, “So much of it was reflective. I don’t think up until then I had had a point in my life where I spent, other than personal journaling, focused time using writing to reflect, especially professionally” (AW/Interview/80-84/1/22/08). Andi’s purpose was clear; she was there to learn about using writing effectively in her classroom.

Not only did Andi learn about writing instruction, she learned a great deal about herself and the fellows who participated with her as well. She explained,
I imagined that everyone else had probably been amazing writing teachers and everyone probably had years of experience in writing or had been innovative, and I would come in as a novice and just be trying to catch up with the pack as far as my knowledge, but what I found was we were a community of like minds. We each were ready to go on to the next step to start getting deeper in our questions and be critical and be reflective. We had similar issues and lots of different experiences. (AW/Interview/359-368/1/22/08)

This revelation along with an asset-based environment allowed Andi to regenerate her own love for writing and get her more enthusiastic about the process again.

She credited part of her renewed pleasure in writing to the environment that had been established prior to and during the invitational summer institute.

It really began before the institute. We had an orientation day where former fellows shared their experiences. Wow, was that powerful. I knew this was going to be great. They told us how the institute works, what would be expected of us, what a day might look like. They even shared some of their personal writing. This was wonderful. They really put themselves out there for us, to make us feel comfortable. (AW/Reflective Statement/22-24/6/29/06)

She believed the leadership team modeled expectations and made everyone feel like valued members of the group,

They did everything they asked us to do. They [leaders] wrote when we wrote. They read when we read. They valued our opinions and it really was teachers teaching teachers. They even referred to themselves by their names not Dr. Weston or Dr. Preston; it was just Lucy and Ethel. They were learners too. (AW/Reflective Statement/40-43/6/29/08)

Andi understood this environment was intentional and served in building the community, “It was just good practices and that allowed us to come together in our community and focus on what we needed to learn” (AW/Interview/512-514/1/22/08).

I could tell that Andi was a motivated learner just from observing her during the invitational summer institute. She was inquisitive and always eager to share her experiences. She valued her time at the invitational summer institute as an opportunity to take ownership of her learning, “It was about me as a learner, not someone standing
up there telling me what I needed to learn. It was me deciding where I wanted to take
my learning” (AW/Interview/390-393/1/22/08). For Andi, this defining moment came
through an activity that the fellows participated in which traced their personal literacy
histories. She discovered a place in her literacy development where she had not been
engaged as a reader and writer and this, “started a whole new conversation in my
[Andi’s] mind and my burning question for the institute,” (AW/Interview/211-213/1/22/08)
which led her to start asking herself questions about grammar instruction, thus mapping
the direction of her new learning during the invitational summer institute. With the
support from the leadership team, as well as the other fellows, she began researching
her topic of interest and developed ideas which she would take back to her classroom.

Andi found that she not only had ideas from her own research to implement with
her students, she had ideas from her learning within the group to take back as well.
Andi valued having the freedom to choose her own learning direction. Several times in
her interview and in her reflective statement she mentioned the importance of choice in
one’s learning, “Choice is paramount for any learner. Having the opportunity to choose
what you want to learn means you will really put effort into it and own it,” (AW/Reflective
Statement/5-7/6/29/06) and “I know how important choice is for my students. When they
have choice they get into it and work harder. Choice is empowering” (AW/Reflective
Statement/10-11/6/23/06).

For Andi, relationships held great value. She knew that relationships within the
invitational summer institute had different meaning and value for participants and
leaders, “Some relationships happened because we were just thrown together. Some
were closer and some were just kind of casual, but all were important during the
One of her most important relationships emerged through carpooling. Since Andi and Jennifer lived in the same general area, they decided to drive the 20 miles back and forth together. This allowed them to have important debriefing time as she recalled, “After eight hours of such intensity, reading, writing, and discussing, I just needed that debriefing before I got home” (AW/Interview/249-251/1/22/08). They developed inside jokes and became supporters of each other’s writing. Andi described this relationship as, “one of those lasting friendships” (AW/Interview/245/1/22/08).

One of the most influential relationships, for Andi, was the one with her table mates. These were the people she got to know the quickest and the ones she shared her most trusted issues with. Andi described these three women as, “the people I trusted the most, share the most with, and relied on the most. We were very different people, but we were very close” (AW/Interview/284-286/1/22/08). In her reflective piece, Andi credited her table mates for giving her the best feedback on her personal writing because, “They knew me the best” (AW/Reflective Statement/40/6/29/06).

Andi developed many more relationships throughout the invitational summer institute. She valued her response group whom she trusted would give her constructive feedback to make her personal writing stronger and better. Her relationship with Lori, in particular, grew out of similarities in age and teaching experiences, “We were about the same age and although we taught different subjects, we had similar experiences and had been teaching similar grade levels” (AW/Interview/256-258/1/22/08). Nita was another fellow who Andi connected with on a personal level, but she expressed that they never talked much. Most of their communication was through encouraging notes
and written responses to each other’s writing. Their relationship was built through trust because they had both experienced personal losses. Andi also developed professional relationships with professors as she was at the beginning of her master’s program and these professors would be the ones she would be working with closely. Andi’s ability to develop these relationships was not unexpected. She was very outgoing, personable, knowledgeable, and eager to share and listen.

When Andi applied to the invitational summer institute, she was looking for ideas, answers, and ways of knowing and doing. When she was invited to attend the invitational summer institute, she found fellows who were, “like minded, reflective, open, trustworthy, people who had similar frustrations and experiences, and people who were open to learning” (AW/Interview/505-507/1/22/08). These were the people she would build a community of practice with. Within her new community, Andi found that everyone was, “willing to share what they knew and had experienced” (AW/Interview/507-508/1/22/08). This was of the utmost of importance to Andi, because that is why she had come to the institute. Teachers’ sharing their personal experiences and knowledge is one of the basic tenets of the National Writing Project and how the shared repertoire is developed within a community of practice. Andi saw the teaching demonstrations as the main vehicle for experiencing sharing and socially constructing knowledge and practices. In her reflective statement she stated,

The demonstration lessons provided me with a plethora of ideas I could take back to my classroom. It was amazing to watch the TC’s get up there and show us what worked, tell us what didn’t work, provide student examples, and then let us try it out. I knew I could use this in my classroom, and I know if I need help or have questions, I have TC’s I can contact. (AW/Reflective Statement/13-15/6/29/06)
The sharing of ideas, experiences, and knowledge was not limited to the teaching demonstrations. I observed Andi and others sharing ideas in structured group settings and informal gatherings such as over lunch or during break time. Andi confessed that the invitational summer institute experience was unlike any other professional development experience she had ever had,

People weren’t afraid that you would steal their ideas. They were eager for you to take it and try it out. It was truly about the sharing. There was a different kind of trust and a different kind of understanding than I think I had ever experienced professionally or personally. (AW/Interview/130-135/1/22/08)

While professional sharing was important to Andi, she talked a great deal about personal writing and opportunities to share those pieces with others, as she stated,

My favorite moments were Author’s Chair and Ah ha’s at the end of the day. Just the variety of humor and drama added insight and reflection at the end of the day. That was a favorite for all of us I know. I never felt anyone really hesitate to get into the chair. You know I think I am an okay writer, but I really didn’t feel the need to share anything. That was kind of a surprise for myself how comfortable it was and powerful it was as a writer. It was good just to share our personal writing. (AW/Interview/99-109/1/22/08)

It was through the actual experience of sharing that Andi found that she was comfortable and enjoyed the sharing of her personal writing. These experiences of sharing allowed the fellows of the invitational summer institute to socially construct knowledge and practices which in turn developed their shared repertoire.

Experiential learning proved to be a powerful format for Andi’s learning. In her personal writing she gained competence and confidence through the sharing process. Professionally, she made meaning from others sharing and participating in the actual activities being shared. It is within the experience where learning takes place, and Andi found this to be true. She saw that these experiences had potential impact for her teaching. Andi stated that usually she did not feel comfortable sharing with her students.
but that experiencing what her students experience would allow her to better understand how to help them within their own writing process and sharing, as she explained, “By experiencing what I ask my students to do, I developed empathy for what they do. Writing is not easy” (AW/Interview/172-174/1/22/08).

Through experiential learning, Andi also discovered talents that she possessed. In her reflective statement, she stated that she enjoyed the reciprocal coaching as the fellows investigated their research topics and prepared for their demonstration lessons. In her interview she went on to say,

I’ve really evolved into more of a leader than I thought I had the capacity to become. I enjoy the informal mentoring of other teachers. I think I have a talent for and I know I have a passion for coaching other teachers, and for being that resource which is taking me into other aspects of my career that I didn’t expect. (AW/Interview/413-420/1/22/08)

Learning-by-doing, or situated learning as Lave and Wenger (1991) term it, was clearly meaningful to Andi’s experience during the invitational summer institute. She found confidence in sharing her personal writing and empathy for the writing her students do as well as discovered new directions for her professional career.

In summary, Andi’s perceptions of her experiences during the invitational summer institute revealed the characteristics of a community of practice. She valued and understood the importance of possessing ownership and autonomy of her personal and professional learning. She perceived feeling safe, valued, and accepted along with having a sense of accountability for other’s learning within the learning rich environment. Andi developed, over the course of the invitational summer institute, personal and professional relationships which were supportive, nurturing, validating, and trustworthy. She built confidence and competence in her writing and teaching
through experiencing learning firsthand. Finally, she shared meaning-making with her fellow participants through the sharing of personal experiences and practices. Andi believed this experience allowed her to grow as a learner and teacher, but only Andi can sum up her experiences:

I am still amazed that all of these people who have all of these different ideas and experiences and philosophies. It is about the group as a whole and us making our own meaning and decisions and us providing our own foundation and our own support system. It wasn’t just about building friendships and having something in common; it was about teaching and learning from each other. Moving in and out of those different roles and following our burning questions. That was the driving force for our meaning making. And we came out better learners, better teachers, and better listeners. We are a community. It was life changing. (AW/Interview/571-583/1/22/08)

Laci

Laci, a third year teacher in a rapidly growing north Texas suburban school district, reported that for the most part her school district was meeting her professional development needs. She had served as the second grade team leader for the past two years and was now involved in grade level curriculum writing. For Laci, attending the National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute did not begin as a way to improve her writing instruction, but rather she attended for personal reasons. When asked to talk about why she attended the invitational summer institute she replied, “The real reason?” and then proceeded to explain that she had attended for the six hours of graduate credit.

I was trying to feel out if I wanted to do the master’s and I knew that if I umm eventually I want to do curriculum and instruction and I wanted to do some curriculum planning and things and I was kind of seeing if this was the right place for me and I needed to see if I wanted to go back to school and how that feels and this [ISI] would be a good opportunity. (LD/Interview/18-26/2/11/08)
She quickly added that the site director’s invitation to apply to attend the invitational summer institute was also a determining factor in her participation.

I heard the benefits of it [ISI]. I was like absolutely! It will be great and, I will get my six hours you know. I’ll get my feet wet, and I’ll get a lot of experience. I can learn a whole bunch. I loved writing anyways, so it will be fun and then I heard that oh! I get to do personal writing too, and that was exciting. (LD/Interview/32-37/2/11/08)

When asked to discuss her experiences during the invitational summer institute, Laci said that her actual experience at the invitational summer institute surpassed her perceived expectations. Laci explained, “It has really changed the way that I look at anything – staff development, education, etc. That first full day I came home and was so excited. I couldn’t wait to go back and I was writing. I was so happy” (LD/Interview/43-48/2/11/08).

For Laci, the invitational summer institute consisted of many new and exciting experiences. She felt that the invitational summer institute environment and atmosphere allowed her to exhibit a different part of her personality. Normally, she would characterize herself as shy and one to “clam up” in new situations. However, the asset-based environment allowed her to, “open up and experience a part of me that I usually don’t get to experience. The environment was supportive and flexible. I felt safe and accepted. There was no judgment. There was no reason for me to be shy” (LD/Interview/571-574/2/11/08). She also expressed that this environment was not like any other professional learning experience she had ever had.

I just loved the atmosphere. The constant everyone wanted to be there and nobody on Earth, nobody would have dreamed of rolling their eyes, or huffing, or saying, ‘Do I have to do that?’ It was definitely a community. It was just everyone was eager to do everything we did. It was safe and flexible. It had different learning styles. For me it was I got to move around a bunch. We read, researched, and best of all wrote. I just loved the supplies and materials. They
had it all for us. It was just like how I have my classroom. It is all about the kids. Here it was all about us. (LD/Interview/400-409/2/11/08)

Laci believes this supportive asset-based environment met the fellows’ physical and mental needs, “Having all of the food and professional materials and supplies was great. It was all about us and our learning. It nourished our bodies and souls” (LD/Interview/ 693-695/2/11/09). It was in this environment that Laci developed and fostered personal and professional relationships. Laci valued and appreciated all relationships.

Relationships, for Laci, were a prime vehicle for moving from the periphery of the community of practice to its core. At first, she was more fully engaged within the comfort of her table group and then began to move out to more uncertain and less comfortable relationships such as her response group and other groups in the invitational summer institute. This fluidity allowed her to engage as an active member and take controlled risks until she fully developed trust and confidence. She knew she could return to the comfort and support of her table mates. In her own words she explains,

The table grouping made a big difference, because we had our comfort zone and we had our little table and we could be comfortable with and you knew them so well by day two that you weren’t afraid to share anything. We could be silly and serious. We supported each other. This was not easy – the work. We had a lot of it and it was intense. We were in it together and we could gripe and laugh. Then we had our response group. They were cool too, but it took a little longer to trust them. Once we got to know and time to work with everyone, there wasn’t anyone who didn’t value you and care about what you were doing or knew. We really bonded in so many ways. We were important to each other. (LD/Interview/547-561/2/11/08)

Laci also felt a sense of respect in these relationships that she revealed she had not experienced in other learning situations, “No one ever disrespected anyone. Even if you didn’t agree, we just said this is how it is or this is what I see, that was okay. We wanted
to hear the other perspective. This has never been the case in other professional
development” (LD/Interview/600-603/2/11/08). These relationships of respect, comfort,
and trust were paramount in Laci’s engagement in the community of practice, and they
encouraged her to open up more and be willing to share her personal writing and
professional ideas.

Laci understood that she was in a giving and receiving environment. She openly
admitted that often times she feels that she is right and can be somewhat unreceptive to
other’s input, but in these relationships she found that, “I could listen openly and hear
suggestions without being defensive, because we were in it together and were all there
to learn. No one thought they were better than another. Everything was done with such
love and care (LD/Interview/591-595/2/11/08).

Laci’s ability to give and receive carried over into the social construction of
knowledge and practices as well, however, at first she was not confident that she had
much to offer others, “I probably had the least experience of anyone in there and
nobody ever treated me that way and I think that was really impressive”
(LD/Interview/619-621/2/11/08). She valued the support and engagement among the
fellows of the invitational summer institute because, “Everyone had so much to offer”
(LD/Interview/724/2/11/08), and credits most of the learning which took place during the
sharing time to the diverse perspectives and multiple interests of the participants,

It wasn’t just writing teachers. It was social studies teachers and science
teachers. It was so many different people from different areas, walks of life that
you are going to get more perspectives than any other venue and you are going
to get more out of it than anything you’ve even done before, professionally
based. …Your writing changes and the way you feel about writing changes. You
learn so much from what others bring to the institute. (LD/Interview/873-
879/2/11/08)
Through the sharing of diverse ideas and teaching demonstrations, Laci saw that she could adapt many of these new ideas to fit her instruction and to the needs of her students. She explained that this was not “normal professional development” and that the majority of what she has experienced had been the typical “sit and get” methods. She was pleasantly surprised and relieved to have the opportunity to actually utilize materials and ideas that were being shared, “I can really use the stuff I learned and was given for my classroom. How exciting is that?”

Another benefit that Laci saw from building a shared repertoire of practices was that she had a community to call on if she experienced difficulty with any of the lessons or ideas. Laci said, “I know one thing that made what we learned so usable was that if you got stuck or needed more information or even more ideas, right there you go, you had people to contact” (LD/Interview/515-518/2/11/08). This was a community she could rely on and one that supported her.

Laci was comfortable sharing her writing and teaching practices with the fellows. She found great pleasure in sharing her personal writing and even made time within her busy schedule of required assignments to have something prepared for Author’s Chair every morning, as she stated, “Sharing was fun and appreciated. I made sure I wrote something every night, so I could have something to share the next day, just in case I didn’t have time to write it at the institute” (LD/Interview/58-62/2/11/08). This was very characteristic of Laci. She was always energetic and eager to share.

For Laci, a great deal of her enjoyment during the invitational summer institute came from the experience of learning. Since Laci openly expressed that she enjoyed being constantly on the move and use to active learning in second grade, the
experiential learning during the invitational summer institute matched her learning style.

Laci took the invitational summer institute seriously because she values teaching and learning, but she also understood that learning needed to be engaging and fun.

It was really fun cause I got to play around with writing…I knew I could write at anytime I wanted. It was great because you wrote and other people wrote and everyone was doing and everyone was excited about it, and we couldn’t wait to share and there were so many styles and poetry and we were listening and writing and that was only the personal writing. We experienced the demonstrations, the research, the tableaus, or whatever it is called, the books. We experienced it all and it felt brand new. (LD/Interview/901-911/2/11/08)

Laci’s excitement about her experiences was meaningful to her not only personally, but professionally too. Learning by doing increased her confidence and competence in her teaching as she explained,

Before the institute, I would have never have tried any of this with my kids. It was about the product. I told them what to do and how to do it. Now having experienced it, I know how they can do it. The can write. They can write poems. We journal. We write stories. Now it is about the process. We experience the process together. (LD/Interview/161-168/2/11/08)

In her reflective statement, Laci wrote about the empathy that she gained through experiential learning.

The personal writing was fun. The demonstrations were informative. But the research, I had not done research in a long time. That kind of technical writing was hard. I didn’t think I was ready for that kind of writing. Now I know and understand what the kids go through. Now I can tell them that I know how hard writing can be. (LD/Reflective Statement/23-25/6/29/06)

While the research requirement of the invitational summer institute might not have been the easiest or most fun assignment, it was one that had a major impact on Laci’s teaching and the direction she took her learning, as she recalled,

It [research] has really opened my eyes. It changed the way I teach. It was so big, but more than big it was about me, my teaching. It’s made me excited about teaching again. I am more aware of what I’m doing. I’m more active in my school district. (LD/Interview/96-101/2/11/08)

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Not only has Laci taken more control of her own learning, she believes her experiences have allowed her to relinquish some control and allowed her students to have more control.

You know it is all about them. That is one thing I’ve learned. They are the ones doing the learning, so they should have choice in what they do. That is exactly what happened at the institute. We had some say and control. They need that too. They need to use their strengths to show what they can do and we work on the rest together. (LD/Interview/275-282/2/11/08)

In summary, Laci participated in the invitational summer institute to find out if graduate school was the “right fit” for her. What she experienced was a community of practice that encouraged her to fluidly move in and out of her comfort zones and relationships that valued and supported both her personal and professional writing. She participated in a learning environment that accommodated her active learning style and capitalized on her strengths and at the same time was flexible, safe, and non-judgmental. Laci experienced learning by doing which fostered her competence and confidence as a writer and teacher, while allowing her to develop empathy for her students’ writing and learning. Along this four-week journey, Laci discovered the value of taking ownership and autonomy of her learning. In Laci’s words, “What I found was my community” (LD/Interview/889/2/11/08).

Lori

Lori, a 9th grade social studies teacher, who was labeled as a “closet English teacher” (LB/Interview/542/2/8/08) by several of the fellows during the invitational summer institute, claimed that she applied to the National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute for personal reasons, “I attended strictly to improve my personal writing” (LB/Interview/57/2/8/08). Lori was introduced and encouraged to attend the
invitational summer institute by Brenda, a National Writing Project teacher consultant and colleague, and the National Writing Project site director. They stressed that the invitational summer institute was an opportunity she would not want to pass up. Being intrigued, Lori applied to attend the invitational summer institute.

Admittedly, Lori was apprehensive at the beginning of the invitational summer institute because she believed she would be the only social studies teacher attending the Invitational Summer Institute and questioned what she would get out of the experience. It did not take long before she realized what she had found, a community of diverse thinkers who were willing to share their experiences. Friendships that blurred the lines of personal and professional. An open and encouraging atmosphere built on trust, support, and accountability and ideas that I could use in my teaching and lots of time to write. (LB/Interview/121-126/2/8/08)

Her experience in the invitational summer institute built her confidence and competence as a writer and changed her teaching.

Lori credited much of her confidence and change to the relationships she experienced during the intense four weeks of learning. Nothing evidenced this more than when she pointed out to me during her interview that she keeps two photos displayed in her classroom. One picture of the 2006 invitational summer institute fellows and the other was of the leadership team. She said, “These are the people I can call on if I need anything. I count on them and they keep me accountable” (LB/Interview/306-308/2/8/08).

Lori, like other participants, developed many different relationships during the invitational summer institute. Some relationships were casual interactions and others were born from deep connections, such as her relationship with Laci.
Laci and I developed a friendship, a close friendship. We had a lot in common. I think that really came out when she shared her piece about change. When she read that, I was able to talk to her about that and tell her that was exactly me. We were able to connect on a personal level and became a support system for each other and kept each other accountable. (LB/Interview/252-259/2/8/08)

Lori cherished every connection she made and appreciated everything that others shared with her. She reported in her reflective statement, “There was something wonderful about everyone here. Everyone gave me so much. I was blessed to have had this opportunity to work with such wonderful and talented teachers” (LB/Interview/393-396/2/8/08).

The relationship that had the most effect on Lori was her relationship with Holli. Holli, a fourth grade language arts/social studies teacher, made Lori feel more at ease and comfortable in the institute from the moment they met. Lori had been concerned that she might not have much use for the activities presented at the invitational summer institute, because she had already attempted to implement journal writing with her students and that failed miserable. She did not wish to repeat that kind of mistake again. Once she and Holli made their connection, Lori was able to lower her apprehensions and open herself up to the invitational summer institute experiences, “I kind of thought, well maybe I just need to work on my personal writing and not focus so much on my students and then it just kind of came out where I was focusing on them and what I can do for my students” (LB/Interview/107-111/2/8/08). Lori found other relationships just as rewarding.

Lori’s response group provided critical feedback for her personal writing which encouraged her to take risks and strive to make her writing better. According to her, “When I didn’t have the right words or couldn’t really get it out the way I wanted to, they
[response group members] were there and talked it through. I took more risks with my writing than I think I ever have” (LB/Interview/287-291/2/8/08). Along the same lines, Lori relied on her table mates for advice regarding her research as well as personal pieces of writing. She found that she could trust them and valued their opinions and expertise.

My table group, now they were a diverse, intelligent group of women. We had a strong bond. We trusted each other and valued each other. We had a great time together. We were very different, but that just meant we had more we could learn from each other. Those were probably some of my closest friendships. (LB/Interview/264-270/2/8/08)

Not all relationships were without conflict according to Lori, “Although I had many wonderful experiences with the fellows and developed lasting friendships, there was one incident which was not so pleasant” (LB/Interview/326-329/2/8/08). She giggled as she elaborated.

Well, it must not have been that bad, because now I don’t even remember being mad. It had to do with sharing something really private maybe, oh I don’t remember. She probably didn’t even know she offended me and I don’t believe I ever said anything to her. It wasn’t worth making a deal out of. We were still able to maintain a professional working relationship. I even asked her to give me feedback on a piece and she was tickled that I asked. (LB/Interview/331-339/2/8/08)

This experience exemplifies Lori’s professionalism and ability to work with others regardless of personal feelings. Lori placed much more emphasis on how positive her relationships were and how valued and trusted they made her feel, “They [fellows] treated me like a professional. They trusted me with their writing and their research and counted on me. They valued what I had to say and offer” (LB/Interview/429-432/2/8/08). For Lori, as well as other fellows, much of the community’s meaning-making happened within and among these trusted relationships, “It was about us learning together, not
isolated and alone” (LB/Interview/203-204/2/8/08). These relationships provided Lori with a sense of trust, diversity, accountability, and support. She found these social interactions as well as the sharing of professional ideas in her relationships to be powerful in her learning.

Lori believed the socially constructed knowledge and practices were valuable components within the community of practice. She knew that for learning to take place sharing was vital as she revealed in her reflective statement, “Sharing what you know is so important because that is how we learn and grow. We shared a lot in the institute and learned a great deal from each other and with each other” (LB/Reflective Statement/36/6/29/06). She also valued the sharing process as it helped her improve her personal writing,” I was looking forward to seeing and hearing what other people do, how they write, what works, what doesn’t work, and how I could use that to make my writing better” (LB/Reflective Statement/3-4/6/29/06). The teaching demonstrations proved to have powerful effects on both her personal writing and classroom instruction, as she stated,

I absolutely loved the demonstrations, you know I loved seeing student samples, and seeing what worked. They even shared what didn’t work. They were open and honest. I could see how these ideas could be used in my classroom and looked forward to trying them out. I even used some of the stuff in my personal writing too. (LB/Interview/184-191/2/8/08)

Lori utilized the demonstration lesson on photo storytelling to prepare a Christmas gift for a family member and, being a history buff and self-proclaimed scrapbook pro, she found the Writer’s Notebook/journal lesson useful in preserving her legacy. These ideas and examples had a powerful effect on her personal writing. She stated,

It is important to write and these ideas helped me find ways to preserve history. I think my life matters and if 500 years from now someone finds my scrapbook
what are they going to know about me? What I write. That is what they are going to know about. Writing is important I want it to be good. (LB/Interview/714-720/2/8/08)

Obviously, Lori’s personal writing was important to her, and it will be preserved for those who come after she is gone. The socially constructed knowledge and practices empowered her to grow in her writing and classroom instruction.

For her classroom, Lori found that multi-genre writing focused on the multiple talents and strengths of her students while still meeting the writing curriculum needs. She stated,

I would have never known about the multi-genre writing if it had not been one of the demonstrations. I would have never in a million years been able to use it if I had not seen the many student samples. It meets so many of my students’ strengths and my teaching requirements. It is a great way to get them to write. (LB/Interview/468-474/2/8/08)

Lori found that the socially constructed knowledge and practices generated in the invitational summer institute influenced both her classroom instruction and personal writing, but perhaps the greatest benefit for her was finding within herself the strength to share her personal literacy struggles with her students. Lori confided,

Being part of a community that is so open and honest and willing to take risks and just put themselves out there, mistakes and all, has allowed me to share my struggles with reading. My students struggle. They need to know that we all struggle and that we are in this together. I want to build that same kind of community in my classroom. I want them to know that I care and that we all in here to learn together. (LB/Interview/582-590/2/8/08)

For Lori, the opportunities to learn through the connections she made and the sharing of practices was valuable, but having the opportunities to experience shared practices such as, the demonstration lessons, Author’s Chair, the Read Arouunds, and the research process were essential to her growth as a learner and teacher. Nothing
could have prepared her to help her students in their learning better than the experiential learning that took place during the invitational summer institute.

These experiences of learning by doing helped her develop empathy for her students’ learning as well. In her reflective statement she said, “One of the best things I take from the institute experience is that I did it. I did what I will ask my students to do and I will know how to help them through the process” (LB/Interview/127-130/2/8/08). The power of learning by doing also resides in the fact that Lori could adapt the lessons and practices she was experiencing to meet the needs of her students. I observed Lori make this realization during one of the Ah-ha moments early on during the institute when she said, “I liked that I am finally learning something that I can just take immediately into the classroom” (LB/Interview/86-88/2/8/09). She added to this sentiment in her interview, “I found that most, if not all, of what I did in the institute I could take it and apply it to my teaching and tweak it for social studies” (LB/Interview/460-462/2/8/08). Experiential learning enabled Lori to develop empathy for what her students go through in their learning as well as elevated her confidence and competence in her own writing, teaching, and learning.

For Lori, the foundation of the community of practice was the asset-based environment and atmosphere of the invitational summer institute. She felt the leadership team was responsible for establishing this asset-based environment,

It was warm, inviting, supportive. They had it all set up for us. There were tables for us, small meeting places, books, materials all laid out for us. A place to have lunch, access to the computers. They took care of our every need. The rest was left up to us. (LB/Focus Group/576-579/4/17/08)

Lori believed that the one thing that solidified the asset-based environment was the establishment of ground rules.
We sat down ground rules for how we were going to treat ourselves, sort of a social contract like I have with my students…This is the framework that we are going to work in, this is why you are going to be able to feel safe, because these are the rules. We all knew up front that sharing something personal meant automatic nobody is going to tell. We began to develop our trust.
(LB/Interview/409-419/2/8/08)

The explicitly stated ground rules allowed Lori to feel comfortable and safe in the developing community of practice and enabled her to experience, “four weeks of soul bearing and writing” (LB/Interview/428/2/8/08).

Lori believed that the leadership team not only established an environment that meet the fellows’ physical needs, but they also established the tone and rhythm of the invitational summer institute through their modeling of expectations and participation as learners, she stated,

We had a daily routine, sort of, it was very flexible. We journaled, went over the daily log, had Author’s Chair, did demonstrations, had lunch, and all of that, but not always in a particular order. It was flexible, depended on what we needed to do. The leaders, they didn’t lead. They participated. They established themselves as learner just like us. They modeled everything. Dr. Preston said it was about us and our needs and that we needed to ‘say what you need’. That was our motto.
(LB/Focus Group/675-686/4/17/08)

For Lori, the invitational summer institute environment was supportive, encouraged diversity, promoted honesty and trust, and allowed her to be herself, “It was about being me. The only way I know how to be” (LB/Reflective Statement/26-27/6/29/06).

Ownership and autonomy of learning was valued by Lori. She saw these characteristics in other fellows as she described, “Laci, she is a real go getter. She knows exactly what she wants and does it” (LB/Interview/251-252/2/8/09) and later stated, “Andi, is so intelligent and focused on her goals” (LB/Interview/271-272/2/8/08). Lori envisioned that her students would have ownership and autonomy of their learning through her support and encouragement to utilize their strengths and interests in multi-
genre writing, as she explained, “I want them to take some control of their learning, to make it personal, to enjoy it. I want them to realize that they have strengths and those strengths have value. I want them to like learning” (LB/Interview/650-653/2/8/08).

Although she described others possessing ownership and autonomy of their learning, Lori did not seem to verbally express these characteristics as strongly when she talked about herself, “I didn’t even know what I wanted when I came in other than to focus on my personal writing” (LB/Reflective Statement/2-3/6/29/06). Lori, on the other hand, displayed ownership and autonomy of her learning. When she entered the Invitational Summer Institute she was non-degree seeking and had no interest in pursuing another degree, “I had no interest in being in school anymore. I was burnt out” (LB/Interview/38-39/2/8/08), but by the second week of the invitational summer institute Lori had taken her GRE (Graduate Record Exam) and decided to work on her master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction at the university. She explained,

With Dr. Preston’s encouragement and others telling me that it wasn’t that many more hours and I thought, ‘Well if it’s not as hard as I thought it would be.’ I went ahead and took the exam, and I was going to be degree seeking. I still can’t believe that. (LB/Interview/65-69/2/8/08)

In summary, Lori’s experiences during the invitational summer institute did much more for her than she expected. She began the invitational summer institute to improve her personal writing skills, and what she experienced was a community of practice. Lori valued the meaningful relationships which fostered trust, support, diversity, respect, and accountability. She developed confidence and competence in her personal writing and teaching by experiencing learning first hand in a safe, flexible, and supportive learning-centered environment. She experienced social meaning making and ignited teaching and personal interests through others’ willingness to share their ideas and experiences.
Lori saw the importance of having ownership and autonomy of one’s learning and wanted to give that to her students. For Lori, this was not simply an experience of a social studies teacher attending a writing institute, it was a teacher learning and making meaning with and from other teachers in a community of practice.

Holli

Holli, an eight-year veteran teacher, had been a fourth-grade language arts/social studies teacher for the past three years. Making the transition to fourth grade was an adjustment and somewhat intimidating, as she admitted, “I was really, really scared about the entire writing thing cause you hear about the fourth grade writing TAKS (the state writing exam), but I found that I really enjoyed the writing” (HG/Interview/23-26/1/28/08). Holli first heard about the National Writing Project and its invitational summer institute through an email sent out by her district. Always eager to learn new writing strategies, she gave the email serious consideration and decided to apply to attend the invitational summer institute. When asked to talk about her decision to apply for the invitational summer institute she replied,

I just wanted to keep learning about writing because I found out I really enjoyed it and I really enjoyed teaching it and so it [ISI] had to do with writing and I knew I could get some masters hours and that kind of enticed me to want to learn more about writing which had slowly became a passion of mine. (HG/Interview/26-32/1/28/08)

Holli also indicated that she needed to learn more about incorporating writing into her social studies instruction and that she was looking forward to ideas and lessons that she could use with her students.

When asked to talk about her experiences during the invitational summer institute, Holli had some mixed reactions. She explained that she was terrified at the
thought of doing a research paper because she had been out of college for nine years and had not produced any major written pieces since then. She then explained that her experiences by the end of the invitational summer institute were of, “excitement and joy” (HG/Interview/55/2/8/08). She explained,

My feeling was it was real nice to feel that umm that feeling of like I guess we called ourselves fellows and it was a fellowship because you were with people that wanted to learn and wanted to be there, umm it was just real nice to have that same, that people felt the same way and you know I could share things with them that you wouldn’t share with normal strangers. (HG/Interview/55-60/1/28/08)

Holli credits much of her success and positive experiences to the environment and atmosphere of the invitational summer institute, “The feeling was not like any other professional development I have ever had. It was warm, cozy, friendly, and welcoming. You just wanted to be there” (HG/Interview/192-194/1/28/08). She continued by describing the leadership team as “facilitators” and not “directors” because, “They lead the way by modeling what we needed to do and how we needed to act. They never told us what to do. The focus was not on grades or assignments; it was on learning, and they did it with us” (HG/Interview/186-189/1/28/08). Holli saw this type of leadership as supportive and freeing, “They gave off a persona of you are important to us” (HG/Interview/181-182/1/28/08).

The leaders also established an asset-based environment that met her needs and learning style, as Holli explains,

The library was a great place to hold the institute. You know, we were reading, writing, and researching. Just being in the library sat that tone. They had a group meeting place where we did demonstrations and group work and there were little group areas where we could go to be with small groups and by ourselves. We used, I guess it was a work room for our lunchroom. That made it all separate. We used the computer lab and had a specific place for Read Arounds, a more serious place where we shared our pieces. It was really what I needed. Places to
get up and move around and to be with others. Definitely not like other workshops or professional development I’ve been to. (HG/Interview/239-247/1/28/08)

Working in this environment not only met her learning needs and encouraged her to build off of her strengths; it also allowed her to be open and receptive to what others had to offer her. “There was this sense of being safe and valued. Everyone was very accepting. This was different. I got a lot from this” (HG/Interview/476-478/1/28/08). For Holli the relationships that occurred during the invitational summer institute were key to her participation and learning.

Holli admitted that going into the invitational summer institute she was somewhat insecure about her ability to contribute and uncertain about what to expect from others. Some of her apprehensions were dismissed at the orientation day where the fellows met each other for the first time, as she commented, “The orientation day made me feel much better about what was going to happen. The teachers who had been in the institute before showed us what happens and I got to meet my fellows. I knew this was going to be okay” (HG/Interview/41-43/1/28/08). She went on to explain that,

I was still terrified about the research paper and what I would have to offer others. I was the only a fourth grade teacher and I felt like I wasn’t as smart as some of the other people and I think that there were only a few of us from elementary and I didn’t teach what those high school teachers had to teach. (HG/Interview/83-88/1/28/08)

As she got to know the fellows better her insecurities dissipated and she became more confident, she was able to move away from the periphery within the community of practice and be more of a contributor in her own learning, as well as the learning of others. The relationships with her table mates provided the support and encouragement
she needed to build her confidence and competence in her knowledge and what she had to offer others.

For Holli, her table mates were her community within the community of practice. She saw these three women as her safe and nurturing nest which allowed her to open up and share personal experiences and issues with them prior to sharing with the larger group. Her table mates accepted and valued her without judgment, and she viewed them as more like her than different, “We were very much alike. Everybody in my group knew my insecurities, and they helped me. If I didn’t understand something they would tell me. Nobody in my group ever made me feel like I wasn’t smart. They were a cool team” (HG/Interview/90-95/1/28/08). Other relationships, for Holli, moved her back toward the periphery of the community of practice as she was still developing her confidence,

As the institute progressed, I was getting better about talking to others and sharing information with them, but still a little insecure. We had more different experiences. I was getting better and I have made some really close and good relationships with some of those people. (HG/Interview/97-102/1/28/08)

In addition to her table mates, Holli credits the leadership team for helping her develop trusting and supportive relationships during the invitational summer institute, “It was great. I could talk with Lucy and she would say things like, ‘So-in-so is working on something similar. You should visit with her’ or ‘I think that so-in-so had a similar experience. Why don’t you talk to her?” (HG/Interview/69-72/1/28/08). This was valuable for Holli, because it provided entry points into conversations and interactions with others that she might not have explored on her own. Holli found that relationships developed through shared personal practices as well.
For Holli, the socially constructed knowledge and practices proved important in building confidence and competence in her own practices. The demonstration lessons provided opportunities for Holli to view successful writing instruction from different perspectives and at different grade levels. These experiences often validated her own practices, as she stated, “It was amazing that so many do very similar things even between high school and elementary. It really made me see that I was doing a lot of good things in my own teaching” (HG/Interview/169-172/1/28/08), and these experiences often sparked new visions of options as well, “I could see how I could use what they brought, and have my fourth graders do it. I adapt it. The student examples really made you know that it worked and that I could make it work” (HG/Interview/172-175/1/28/08) She often referred to the teaching demonstrations as “best practices” (HG/Interview/143/1/28/08), strategies and ideas that effective teachers use in their classrooms. Seeing these practices and participating in them during the invitational summer institute provided Holli with ways to reflect on her own teaching and to problem solve new ways to impact the learning of her students, as she explained, “The demonstration lessons really helped me look at what I do and how I can change or add to what I do with my students and make the learning better and stronger. Ways to integrate writing were clearer” (HG/Interview/409-412/1/28/08).

The socially constructed knowledge and practices were not confined to the teaching demonstrations. Holli found that she had many opportunities to share practices, problem solve, and make new meaning in other social experiences. She valued all opportunities that were made available for sharing. She stated, “Sharing was hard at first, but having others share very personal things about themselves and their
teaching was so very powerful. These were things you would not share with just anyone else” (HG/Interview/214-217/1/28/08). She recalled times where the sharing was powerful for her,

We started off by sharing bags (memory bags) and stuff and that’s a very powerful thing to start off sharing. To share that with people you don’t know and to start off with something like that and you’re already exposing yourself, and so when you expose yourself and they can receive it well, then that kind sets a powerful tone of what can and needs to be shared … I remember there were some powerful things shared during that time and I shared about my mother and others shared very personal things and it was so emotional. There is something about when you cry and everybody cries. It just breaks down barriers. And that happened on the first day. (HG/Interview/198-208/1/28/08)

Later on, she discussed instances where others shared teaching moments that showed their confidence and strength and made them vulnerable to the community,

It was powerful to see people put themselves out there. They shared things that didn’t work. Things they gave up on. Things about their students that frustrated them and things they did wrong. That was something you would never see in regular professional development, not in a million years. Teachers admitting they didn’t do something right. That was powerful and comforting. And instead of going ‘Oh you messed up.’ We were like, ‘me too’. (HG/Interview/218-225/1/28/08)

Not only were the opportunities to socially construct knowledge and practices important and powerful learning experiences, having the opportunities to experience practices and activities during the invitational summer institute impacted Holli’s confidence and competence in her knowledge and teaching.

For Holli, the experiential learning that took place during the invitational summer institute was valuable. She admitted that she often did not find time in her class to write with her students. Unfortunately, much of her focus was on preparation for the fourth grade writing TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) test, she said, “They were always writing, and I was always grading, and it was hard to find time to write with
them. I modeled what they had to do, but we didn’t have time to just write” (HG/Interview/372-375/1/28/08). Experiencing writing activities and demonstration lessons firsthand showed Holli that there was time for her to write with her students and that not all writing had to focus on the test,

Doing the writing, actually participating like a student, but at our level, showed me how this could be done in my class. It was fun and exciting. We really got into it. I could see how to adapt things to my class. I had examples as well as the lesson. I was all the time thinking how, ‘How can I use this in my class?’ and ‘What would this look like in my room?’ The poems, the journaling, the Read Aroun ds, Author’s Chair, these were all useful activities I could use in my class. (HG/Interview/380-388/1/28/08)

Experiential learning provided Holli with the opportunity to engage in the practices she wanted to put into action when she returned to the classroom. “By doing the work, actually experiencing it, I got to practice and be ready for using it with my students. I would be able to better explain it to them and guide them through because I had actually done it” (HG/Interview/564-567/1/28/08), she stated. This type of learning, learning by doing, helped Holli develop empathy for her students’ own experiences with the writing process and learning in general, as she shared, “I knew this [research project] would be hard coming into the institute, but I never really thought about how my frustrations might mirror those of my students. Now I understand what they go through and how they feel” (HG/Interview/275-278/1/28/09). By adding this empathetic stance to her teacher, she felt as if her students would be able to advance farther in their learning, become better writers and be able to develop a stronger commitment to each other and their community, “I want them to know that I understand. I want them to realize they are not the only ones who struggle or have bad days. I want them to help each other. I can do that by being that model and showing my writing” (HG/Interview/392-396/1/28/08).
While experiencing these activities promoted empathy for her students’ learning and allowed her to practice what she wanted her students to accomplish, experiential learning went deeper for Holli. She admitted that she had not had time in the past to write and at the invitational summer institute she found that writing served as a very personal outlet for her emotions. One might say that writing was therapeutic for Holli. She explained it as, “An opportunity to get my emotions out and think about things I hadn’t thought about in a long time and deal with things” (HG/Interview/138-140/1/28/08). She viewed other opportunities to write as creative outlets where she could utilize her strengths, “The daily log was exciting. I enjoyed seeing all of the creativity and individuality that everyone put in theirs. It made me dig deep and figure out how I could make it interesting to other people and how to make it different. It was fun” (HG/Interview/147-151/1/28/08). Experiencing the writing activities and demonstration lessons, for Holli, was fun, informative, and useful to her teaching and her students’ learning. In addition to all of that, Holli found that the reflective process she went through during these experiences enabled her to focus and guide her own learning during the invitational summer institute.

While Holli’s stated purpose for attending the invitational summer institute was to improve her writing instruction and learn more about integrating writing into social studies, she admitted that she learned more about herself than anything else. She learned through her relationships, experiences, frustrations, and accomplishments that she was developing ownership and autonomy over her own learning. This developing realization for Holli centered on her dreaded research paper.

I was scared of that paper. I knew coming in that I had to write it and it would be long, and I wasn’t ready for it and then I learned about the multi-genre, and being
taught that and hearing about using it to write our research paper and I was like, “Wow! Can I really do my paper that way? Because I can easily break it down and be creative and that would make it doable and make it less daunting. (HG/Interview/265-272/1/28/08)

When asked how her paper turned out, she replied,

You know it wasn’t that bad after all. I realized that things don’t always have to be one way and only one way and by doing things differently we can use our strengths. I am unlearning some of those bad habits of one way. It makes learning more fun when you have choice. (HG/Interview/280-284/1/28/08)

It is evident that Holli was in transition as far as her own sense of ownership and autonomy over her personal learning, but she realized that these skills are important to promote in her students.

In summary, Holli’s perceptions of her experiences during the invitational summer institute revealed the characteristics of a community of practice. She perceived feeling safe, valued, accepted, and welcome from the initial orientation meeting prior to the actually beginning of the invitational summer institute. She felt her physical needs were met and that the asset-based environment accommodated for many learning styles. The relationships which Holli experienced were rich with encouragement and support for her personal writing and her professional learning. She perceived these relationships to be nurturing and non-judgmental. These relationships were built on a foundation of mutual respect and valued the knowledge and expertise brought by all. The socially constructed knowledge and practices, she felt, were generated from a display of best practices which validate many of her own practices and encouraged self-reflection and meaning making. Holli developed confidence and competence in her writing and teaching, as well as empathy for her students writing and learning. Holli also
began to develop and understand the importance of ownership and autonomy for her own learning and for her students’ learning.

Holli began the invitational summer institute with fear and uncertainty about what she would experience, and in the end she realized,

Many of my insecurities kind of vanished because I realized I had accomplished a great deal. I completed the paper. I had many great ideas to take back to my classroom. I learned so much about myself as a person and as a teacher, but more than any of that I had a community I could count on, and they could count on me. (HG/Interview/436-441/1/28/08)

**Brandi**

Brandi, a second year teacher, had completed her first year of teaching Kindergarten when she entered the invitational summer institute. Brandi claimed that although she attended the invitational summer institute for the six hours of graduate credit, she knew it would be a valuable experience that would improve her teaching. Since she had only taught Kindergarten for one year, she wanted to acquire writing ideas that would meet the needs of her young students. When asked to talk about her experiences at the invitational summer institute, she replied,

I really enjoyed it. At first, I thought it was going to be a lot of work going day after day on your break, you know, your summer break, and then not being really sure if I fit in during the first two days. But after the second day, you start to make really good friends, and you become more comfortable with everybody. It was a warm and supportive environment. I gained a lot personally. (BC/Interview/23-28/1/24/08)

For Brandi, her invitational summer institute experience took place in an asset-based environment which provided opportunities to build relationships, to increase her confidence in her abilities, to share her experience and writing to socially construct knowledge and a repertoire of practices, and to take ownership of her learning.
Like other fellows, Brandi considered relationships a major contributor to her positive experience during the invitational summer institute. According to her, personal relationships held the most value, “I became close with people who teach in my same area or teach around me or the same grade level. I found those to be pretty close friendships. We shared the most in common” (BC/Interview/64-68/1/24/08). Her closest relationships, similar to other participants, were the ones she formed with her table mates.

For me, it was my table. They were the ones I really connected with. They were the ones I could cut up with. We had a silly sense of humor. They were the ones I did most everything with. Spending most of the day with them caused you to be more comfortable. You begin to trust them more, and you start to share more and learn more about each other. We had a lot in common. They were my support group. (BC/Interview/54-66/1/24/08)

Although not as close, other relationships were important to Brandi as well, as she recalled, “The more I talked to others and learned more about them, the more comfortable I became. It was not always easy for me to share with others, but I was able to make some good connections. It took me more time” (BC/Interview/66-73/1/24/08). Brandi’s need for more time to become comfortable with fellows that she had less in common with, reflected her peripheral position within the community of practice. As she became more comfortable, she moved further in the community and closer to active and full participation. The asset-based environment within the community of practice assisted Brandi in developing her comfort and confidence levels.

Brandi, like other fellows, believed the asset-based environment was the foundation of the invitational summer institute. When asked to talk about the learning environment, Brandi responded,
Everything revolved around it [environment]. The way things were set up for us, the resources, computers, demonstrations. Just the way everything worked … It was supportive … The environment was very important in building our community. It is the kind of environment you want in your classroom.

(BC/Interview/216-232/1/24/08)

Although she saw the environment as being carefully orchestrated by the leadership team, she found that having the opportunity to establish ground rules for the invitational summer institute played an instrumental part in the atmosphere of the environment and to her positive experience, as she explained,

We felt safe, valued, accepted and were able to trust each other because we put the ground rules together. It was what we wanted. No one told us how it would be. We developed the rules. Probably the most important rule that allowed us to be comfortable and open up was the one about no one says anything about what happens at the institute. That allowed us to trust each other and be comfortable.

(BC/Interview/245-255/1/24/08)

Time was another element of the asset-based environment she needed and valued, “Time was important. You don’t often have time to do what you need to do. The kind of supportive environment we had provided time, time to read, write, and work on the things that were important to you” (BC/Interview/193-195/1/24/08). She credited this gift of time to the leadership team and the weekly schedule,

They [leadership team] made sure we had time to work. We were very busy and the schedule made sure we stayed on track, but time was scheduled in. It was flexible. If we needed more time, they gave it to us. (BC/Interview/199-202/1/24/08)

Time gave Brandi the opportunity to become comfortable with others, as well as accomplish her work during the invitational summer institute. Other elements of the asset-based environment such as feelings of safety, comfort, and acceptance allowed the fellows to open up and share their personal practices. For Brandi this was an evolving transition.
Sharing was never easy for Brandi. However, she did become comfortable with her table mates and shared openly with them, but sharing personal writing with the larger group was a different story, as she admitted,

Author’s Chair was nerve-racking for me personally, because I didn’t really like sharing things I had written and you know some of it was personal and things like that, but as time went on you just started to realize that everybody is there for the same reason and that everybody is not going to judge you. They don’t care what you have to say, they just want to hear what you have to say. (BC/Interview/44-50/1/24/08)

In her own time, Brandi began to share more with others, but was still guarded. She did, however, enjoy everything that others shared with her and gained many ideas to take back to her classroom, as she stated, “Everyone had such good ideas and so many experiences, I was just amazed at how many great ideas I got and all the super advice” (BC/Interview/87-89/1/24/08). As Brandi became more comfortable in the environment, made trusting connections with others, received supportive encouragement, and gained confidence, she began to participate more as a full member of the community of practice.

Brandi fully engaged in the socially constructed meaning making which often took place during the demonstration lessons. These were experiential learning opportunities which resulted in concrete ideas and activities which would be adapted and utilized in her classroom. During these times when everyone was engaged in the hands-on learning, Brandi found herself in the collective flow of the community of practice. She perceived everyone to be on the same learning level:

We were all there doing the same thing. It didn’t matter if you were high school or elementary, we were all doing it and learning how to adapt it and use in our classrooms. It was neat that we were all learning it together. I was amazed at how I could find ideas from high school to use in Kindergarten. (BC/Interview/124-128/1/24/08)
Brandi enjoyed other opportunities to learn firsthand as well. The tableau demonstrations actively engaged the fellows and encouraged them to have fun while learning. According to Brandi,

I distinctly remember that [the tableau lesson]. We had so much fun doing that. We were trying to portray a scene from a book and we were all into it. I just knew my kids would love doing something similar to that. What made it so good is that it was so new to all of us. I don’t think anyone had done it before and we just got up there and did it. I heard others say they liked it too and would use it. (BC/Interview/230-236/1/24/08)

She felt that experiential learning and participating in this type learning with others was powerful and improved her confidence and competence, “It just improves everyone’s teaching. You get this sense of camaraderie between teachers” (BC/Interview/270-271/1/24/08). Brandi also felt this type of learning reflected her classroom:

The activities that we did reflect what I do because a lot of the activities we were doing in that [ISI] were hands on and lots of group work. It wasn’t very much work by yourself. If anything you were almost always with someone else. I do that a lot in my own classroom. We are constantly doing group work and that makes learning more fun. (BC/Interview/279-284/1/24/08)

Another area in which Brandi participated fully and felt like she was a contributing member of the community of practice was in her personal research interests. Brandi felt she had ownership and autonomy over her learning, as she expressed,

This [ISI] was like no other program I have ever been in. We had assignments and certain things we had to do, but they were not telling us what to do and when to do it. We got to choose for ourselves. That is one of the big things that made it different. We got to decide. (BC/Reflective Statement/13-15/6/29/06)

Brandi valued having the opportunity to focus her attention on her classroom and her needs. As a new Kindergarten teacher, her research focus was on beginning writers and what they can accomplish. This allowed Brandi to focus her research where it needed to be, as she explains, “There were a lot of things I wanted to know and a lot of
things I wasn’t doing in my classroom that I needed to know. So this gave me a chance
to figure out what I wanted to change and what I needed to do” (BC/Interview/250-
253/1/24/08). Brandi also found that this was a time where she could engage with
others in the community of practice without feeling uncomfortable,

They [fellows] were really cool. They helped me. They didn’t judge. No one
judged. I was able to talk to lots of them about what worked and what they had
done. They really listened. This really helped me figure out where I wanted to go
in my research. It was great. I could talk to the leaders for ideas and direction
and also to other fellows for their experience and understanding. We all had
similar interests. You know it is all about writing. So, what they knew helped
guide me. (BC/Reflective Statement/ 45-50/6/29/06)

Having ownership and autonomy over her own learning was important to Brandi, as she
described, "Having choice is important. When you have choice, you can really learn
something. Not because a teacher tells you ‘this is what is what you are going to learn,’
but because you want to know. You make it more personal. It becomes important to
you” (BC/Interview/145-151/1/24/08). She also stressed that she uses this same
philosophy with her students, “I want my students to have choice. Writing is a good way
to give them choice. When they have choice they do much better” (BC/Interview/152-
153/1/24/08). For Brandi, having ownership and autonomy over one’s learning is
powerful.

In summary, Brandi attended the invitational summer institute to obtain her first
six hours of graduate credit and knew this opportunity would also benefit her teaching.
She had a positive learning experience during the invitational summer institute as she
developed friendships and professional working relationships in a supportive, non-
judgmental, and accepting learning environment. She built confidence and competence
through experiencing learning firsthand and shared her knowledge and practices as she
became more comfortable in the community. She found direction for her research interests that informed and changed her teaching. Brandi understood that she, “grew as a learner, teacher, listener, and writer” (BC/Reflective Statement/76/6/29/06).

Summary

In an attempt to better understand the characteristics of a community of practice, this study sought to describe the characteristics of a community of practice as revealed by the perceptions and experiences of the participants from a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute. The findings pointed to five themes, ownership and autonomy, asset-based environment, relationships, socially constructed knowledge and practices, and experiential learning in relation to the research question: What characteristics of a community of practice are revealed by the perceptions and experiences of the fellows of a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute? While these themes support the Wenger et al. (2002) definition of a community of practice and illuminate the three dimensions necessary for a community of practice to exist: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire, they are specifically more descriptive of the community of practice within a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute which focuses on the improvement of writing and writing instruction through effective teacher professional development.

Through interviews, observations, reflective statements, and other archived data, rich descriptions of the participants’ experiences emerged and were illuminated in portraits to give voice to their unique and meaningful experiences. These portraits provide an opportunity for the reader to gain an insider’s view of the complex and intertwined workings of a community of practice as experienced by its members. The
following chapter provides the discussion, interpretation, and synthesis of these findings as well as suggests directions for further research related to the phenomenon under investigation.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this naturalistic, descriptive case study was to better understand and describe the characteristics of a community of practice as revealed by the perceptions and experiences of the fellows of a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute. The data indicate and are supported by the literature (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2002) that a community of practice existed during the invitational summer institute and provide a better understanding of the characteristics of communities of practice. The participants’ perceptions illuminate the characteristics of a community of practice through the following five complex and intertwining themes: (1) ownership and autonomy, which allowed participants to control and direct their learning; (2) an asset-based environment that promoted feelings of safety, comfort, acceptance, and of one being valued for her knowledge and experiences; (3) relationships which were receptive, validating, engaging, supportive, respectful, nurturing, and mutually accountable; (4) socially constructed knowledge and practice which involved sharing personal and professional experiences and practices for meaning making purposes; and (5) experiential learning which allowed participants to experience learning activities firsthand and which in turn built confidence and competence in their writing and instructional practices. The experiential learning opportunities also allowed participants to develop empathy for others’ struggles and experiences. Not only did these themes provide a better understanding and clearer picture of a community of practice, they also brought to light the necessity of entry points, according to Wenger (1998), which
encourage and enable participants to engage and participate in the community of practice. The participants’ perceptions and descriptions of their experiences also highlighted their ability and propensity to engage in and benefit from the community of practice based on their motives and dispositions. The following discussion focuses on each theme as supported through the literature. This is followed by a discussion of the community of practice entry points which enabled participates to actively engage in the invitational summer institute as interpreted by me and supported in the literature. Next a brief discussion of the differences that made a difference for the participants as related to the themes is presented to further highlight the complexity of communities of practice. Implications and further research needs conclude the chapter.

Summary of Findings

First, it is important to briefly recall the definition of a community of practice. A community of practice is defined by Wenger et al. (2002) as a “group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). A community of practice is comprised of “a domain, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain” (p. 27). The three dimensions that must be present for a community of practice to exist are: (1) mutual engagement – how the group functions; (2) a joint enterprise – what the community is about; and (3) a shared repertoire – the resources the group has generated (Wenger, 1998). These three dimensions are connected in that they all must be present for a community of practice to exist and they build on each other. There must be a purpose for members to come
together, and these members must negotiate their knowledge and understanding in order to generate new knowledge and artifacts (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice situate learning in social practices and at the control of the members of the community. Such communities develop over time and through member commitment. Communities of practice generate great value for their members through the building of relationships, a sense of belonging and identity, a desire to learn, and increased personal and professional confidence and competence (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002).

Ownership and Autonomy

The first theme identified in this study focused on participants’ perceptions and experiences of having ownership and autonomy over their learning during the invitational summer institute. Adult learners desire to have control and say over their learning because they want learning to make sense, to have meaning for them, and for it to be connected to their daily lives (Knowles, 1980; Taylor, Marienau, and Fiddler, 2000). For adults, learning is connected to and guided by their past experiences, interests, and goals (Knowles, 1980; Lawler, 1991). Throughout their discussions, participants talked about the importance of having opportunities to direct their personal learning and having choice about what and how they would pursue their writing, reading, learning activities, and the direction of the invitational summer institute. Lieberman and Wood (2003) argue that “without that sense of ownership learners are rarely truly engaged or motivated (p. 25). The National Writing Project (2008) insists that professional development be teacher-centered where teachers are encouraged to
identify their own problems and issues and then pursue answers through self-directed learning opportunities.

A Community of practice, as Wenger (1998) discusses, evolves naturally out of the interests and desires of its members. It cannot be forced into existence by outside or controlling forces, but at the same time a community of practice needs some sort of support and guided direction (Wenger, 1998). Participants stated that although they had a daily schedule, assignments, and even a syllabus that acted as their directional navigator, they were the ones who controlled the direction of their daily learning within the invitational summer institute. This is supported by Lieberman and Grolnick (1996) who found that effective professional development agendas must “emerge from the work of the participants” (p. 30), which develops from the participants’ interests, desires, and needs.

Wenger (1998) purports that people who engage in communities of practice have both “complementary” and “overlapping” (p. 70) contributions to offer other members of the community which work to guide the direction the community moves. All participants in this study reported having similar interests and experiences which helped them connect with others and at the same time had different interests and experiences which afforded them opportunities to gain new ideas and knowledge. For the shared practice to develop, this type of mutual engagement must occur. Encouraging the fellows to reflect on what worked well in their classrooms and at the same time develop individual “burning questions” to research and investigate bound the fellows together in that they were doing the same activities yet they were working toward their individual goals. This
provided an opportunity to develop a larger shared repertoire which all members of the community of practice benefit from.

Wenger states, “A community coordinator does not ‘lead’ the community in the traditional sense, but brings people together and enables the community to find its direction” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 43). Three of the participants, Andi, Lori, and Brandi, described that having the opportunity to establish ground rules at the beginning of the Invitational Summer Institute empowered them and set a tone that enabled them to feel comfortable, safe, and open up to be themselves without fear of being judged. These short and simple rules became part of their shared repertoire and enable the participants to be part of what Wenger (1998) termed the, “distributed leadership” (p. 36).

Four of the participants, Andi, Holli, Laci, and Lori, noted the importance of having the opportunity to reflect on their practices within their classrooms prior to attending and during the Invitational Summer Institute. Andi used the reflective process to examine her teaching practices much like Stronge (2002) defined reflective practices as, “careful review of and thoughtfulness about one’s own teaching process” (p. 20). Andi saw herself as a learner and valued the process of reflecting to identify her strengths and needs as a teacher. She used writing throughout the invitational summer institute to reflect on her teaching which directed her burning question and research inquiry. Laci and Lori discussed having moments which they were able to reflect on their teaching practices as new learning took place. These moments were valued as learning opportunities to examine past experiences in comparison to new experiences (Stronge, 2002). Holli was reflective about her personal academic writing. She saw that having the
opportunity to make choices about her research paper empowered her and built her confidence which made the process much more enjoyable. Reflective practices have been identified in the literature as part of an effective teacher’s repertoire of teaching practices (Henson, 2003; Law, 2002; Stronge 2002) and a positive characteristic of adult learners (Knowles, 1980) which empowers and encourages the learner to have ownership and autonomy over his or her learning.

Asset-based Environment

The literature is replete with both theoretical and practitioner research which supports the establishment and use of asset based-environments in education (Dewey, 1938; Haberman, 2004; Henson, 2003; Huba & Freed, 2000; Knowles, 1980; Law, 2002; Vosko, 1991) and more specifically, for this study, communities of practice (Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Wenger, 1998.) All participants in this study reported the invitational summer institute environment and atmosphere as meeting their physical and cognitive needs. In Henson’s (2003) historical examination of the major contributions and development of effective learning environments in education, he lays out four basic assumptions that support effective learning for all. These include: (1) taking into consideration and respecting the history, interests, goals, and beliefs of the learner; (2) understanding and acknowledging the learner’s emotional state, learning styles, and talents (3) actively engaging the learner in meaningful and useful learning; and (4) establishing opportunities for positive interactions and relationships which value, respect, and appreciate the learner. A fifth basic assumption, which is not in the control of the person planning or facilitating professional development, but is still important for effective learning environments, according to Henson (2003), is that the learner must be
curious and eager to learn. Wenger (1998) supports these learning environment components and believes this type of environment is necessary to encourage mutual engagement, support the joint enterprise, and to foster the building of a shared repertoire.

Each participant reported having her physical and cognitive needs met during the invitational summer institute. The environment had a “homey” atmosphere which made Laci comfortable enough to bring personal items and make herself at home. Food was available whenever they needed a snack break and was even important enough to become the subject of some written pieces shared in Author’s Chair. Resources such as a library of professional books and teacher supplies were available to limit disrupted learning time. The participants expressed having experienced a warm, welcoming atmosphere where they were valued and supported.

The participants actively engaged in learning experiences that utilized multiple learning styles which enhanced their enjoyment and learning during the invitational summer institute. By having these basic needs taken care of, participants found they could fully engage in the community of practice. Wenger (1998) refers to this as “community maintenance” (p. 74) where the community members take the time and effort to invest in learning about each other’s needs and desires and to make sure others needs are met and working conditions are optimal to ensure that mutual engagement and learning take place.

Participants described an environment in which their personal learning styles and preferences were valued and supported. Research shows that there are probably as many ways to teach as there are ways to learn. The literature on adult learning points
out the importance of accommodating the diverse learning styles and needs of individual learners (Cranton, 2006; Trotter, 2006). Participants engaged in multiple learning opportunities which accommodated their individual learning styles and preferences. Accommodating different learning styles within a community of practice is supported as well by Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of situated learning where some learners learn best by operating alongside the more experienced professional and others need to observe prior to engagement. By accommodating the learners’ needs and desires, learning is internalized and becomes part of the learner thus fostering the development of the shared knowledge base and shared repertoire. Brandi, being a relatively newer teacher, found that the asset-based environment within the community of practice met her needs as a learner. She could hold back and be more observant and absorb ideas and strategies from others. She felt like she did not have as much to offer to others and had fewer experiences. As she became more comfortable and confident in the surroundings of the invitational summer institute, she began to share more, but still within her personal comfort zone. Clearly, Brandi was operating within Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development as well as under the assumption that Knowles (1980) puts forth that a learner moves from being a dependent learner, relying on the knowledge and assistance of others, to a more self-directing adult as the learner matures and has more learning opportunities.

Relationships

The very nature of the term community of practice establishes the notion that relationships are important. For a community of practice to exist, its members must engage in regular interactions with each other (Wenger, 1998). Relationships, above all
else, were valued, appreciated, and fostered by all participants in this study. Seen throughout the literature and grounded in theory is the importance and need for teachers to work collaboratively to develop new and shared meaning (Friszer, 2004; Holmes & Meyeroff, 1999; Huba & Freed, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Knowles, 1980; Wenger et al., 2002). Participants reported that during the invitational summer institute they had multiple opportunities to work collaboratively together in both formal and informal situations. These interactions and relationships were seen by the participants and supported by Holmes & Meyeroff (1999) as quality interactions where the participants came together not for simple casual conversations, although those occurred too, but for meaning making that reinforced the development of the community of practice and influenced their learning. For these participants, relationships emerged for different reasons and at different levels. Each was unique and served its intended purpose.

Andi engaged in numerous interactions and formed multiple relationships at various levels of commitment. She reported that these relationships validated her beliefs, stimulated her thinking, fostered her sense of belonging, and supported risk taking. These same characteristics were also valued by participants in other studies (Glass & Walter, 2000; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Silva & Tom 2001; Wenger, 1998) who were encouraged to work collaboratively with peers and other participants. Andi, Laci, Lori, and Holli also found that these relationships allowed them to talk openly and feel safe enough to share frustrations they had within their teaching and personal writing. Manouchehri (2001) described this as “getting something out of your system” (p.93), where teachers who had formed close relationships and bonded felt more
comfortable and could open up and share more. All five participants reported having a closer bond with their table mates during the institute and all attributed these close relationships to the time spent together and their investment in each other’s learning and success.

For Andi, relationships were vehicles to share her experiences, knowledge, insecurities, failures, and goals. She found these relationships to be nurturing, supportive, and safe. She trusted and respected the fellows who she considered colleagues and friends. New career interests developed for her through participation in peer coaching relationships. Holli, Laci, Lori, and Brandi had similar experiences where they learned valuable lessons about their teaching, writing, and themselves through these valuable relationships. These sustained mutual relationships, whether harmonious or conflictual allowed the participants to engage in the community of practice, negotiate meaning making, and develop their shared resources (Wenger, 1998).

The relationships described by the participants are supported in the tenants of sociocultural theory (Dixon-Krauss, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978) where the acquisition and use of knowledge is dependent on social interaction and being immersed into the history of the community. Gauvain (2005) would agree that these participants displayed the ability,

to engage in reciprocal exchanges, social behaviors that facilitate access to the thinking of other people, and the ability to participate in social arrangements in which the valued knowledge of the group is made available and supported in both rudimentary and advanced forms. (p.11)

Some researchers (Pemberton, Marvin, & Stalker, 2007; Roberts, 2006) have criticized Wenger’s relationships, within a community of practice, purporting that it is an
unrealistic and utopian concept to believe a community of practice will have supportive and nurturing relationships without conflict. Wenger (1998) is clear in his thinking that community of practice relationships do not have to be harmonious, and in fact are often stronger when conflict and differences exist among members. This study supports Wenger (1998) thinking as participants reported the value of diverse thinking and bringing different ideas to the learning environment.

**Socially Constructed Knowledge and Practices**

The National Writing Project model was built on the assumption that teachers are the best teachers of one another and that teachers have expertise from experiences that needs to be valued and shared (NWP, 2009). The invitational summer institute stresses, “Learning as a social phenomenon and teaching as a collective responsibility,” (Lieberman & Wood, 2003, p.15). This understanding encouraged fellows to take interest in others’ experiences, ideas, and practices. Wenger (1998) believes that it is the sharing of experiences and practices that has the greatest potential to generate knowledge within a community of practice. The participants of this study reported having multiple opportunities to share their personal experiences and practices with each other which in turn allowed them to generate a shared practices and knowledge. They found the teaching demonstrations to be one of best forums to share their personal practices with each other.

One of the cornerstones of the invitational summer institute, the teaching demonstration, provided opportunities for participants to open up their teaching practices for others to learn from, view, and critique (Lieberman & Wood, 2003). This practice is supported in the literature as a type of professional development that
emphasizes teachers as reflective practitioners (Friszer, 2004). Andi found this to be true in her experience during the invitational summer institute. She came to the invitational summer institute already reflecting upon her teaching practices and was excited to learn what others had to offer. Sharing her practices and receiving honest feedback from others who had similar and differing issues, problems, and needs gave her the opportunity to examine her teaching practices through different lenses.

Brandi benefited from the sharing of personal practices as well. However, she reported that she did not open up as much as she should have and felt that she did not have as much to offer as the other fellows. Much of her learning took place in the periphery of the community of practice. She was clearly operating, as Rogoff (1990) terms it, in guided participation. In this view the learner is not a simple doing what she is told by someone who is more knowledgeable and experienced. The learner is participating fully at his or her current level of understanding and maturation. This type of participation requires the assistance of others who have a higher level of understanding working with the participant at his/her level of readiness (Rogoff, 1990). Lave and Wenger (1991) and Vygotsky (1978) would say that Brandi was experiencing optimal learning. She was in a place, situated within the community of practice where she could learn from more experienced and knowledgeable members by engaging at her level of readiness. As Brandi became more comfortable in her membership in the community and with her own knowledge and understanding, she began to participate more within the invitational summer institute. She developed personal confidence and was able to share more and speak in front of the fellows more comfortably. She gathered many teaching ideas from the demonstration lessons that she felt would work
with her Kindergarteners and began to see her own writing improve. More importantly, Brandi began to make connections between what she was learning and experiencing with others and the learning of her students.

Having the opportunity to share one’s personal practices with others and in turn learn from the practices of others was powerful for these participants. This encouraged them to be fully engaged members of the community of practice and allowed them to effectively learn from the communities socially constructed knowledge and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998).

*Experiential Learning*

During the invitational summer institute participants experienced learning that was reflective of Kolb’s (1984) four stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle where the learner first has a direct experience then considers if the experience is meaningful and worth using. If the learner decides that the learning is useful then the next stage is to develop a plan for using the learning. Once a plan is conceived, then the learner tries out the learning within another context such as a classroom. All of the participants in this study experienced this type of firsthand learning through the demonstration lessons, writing activities, sharing activities, and research. Andi, as well as others, found that the demonstration lessons met her need to find new ideas to use in her own teaching. These ideas and strategies were often generated by lessons teachers had successfully used in their own classrooms and were sharing how they had successfully worked by inviting the fellows of the institute to actively participate in the actual lessons. The invitational summer institute fellows debriefed after participating in the lessons, considering what worked well and what did not. This was a way for the fellows to begin
to conceptualize how the lessons might be utilized within their own teaching as well as giving the facilitator of the lesson constructive critical feedback. The participants felt they could then take these strategies and ideas back into their classrooms and implement them in their own teaching. Andi found this type of learning valuable because she was able to experience the learning and saw how she could adapt it to her own teaching. By experiencing the learning she had a better understanding for what her students would experience during the learning process. This encouraged her to be more empathetic to her students’ struggles and allowed her to provide better scaffolding to support their learning. The other participants reported similar feelings and experiences surrounding the demonstration lessons. Similar experiences have been reported in the literature on communities of practice and the National Writing Project (Choi, 2006; Estes, 2004; Holman, Smith, & Welch, 2009; Hicks, 1997; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Seed, 2008; and Trent, 1995). This type of active learning is also supported in sociocultural learning theories (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978) and adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980) which assumes the learner brings knowledge and experiences to the learning experience and through collaboration with other learners within the learning environment the learners construct new meaning.

Participants in this study reported that having opportunities to experience writing as a writer and not necessarily as a writing teacher changed their negative and apprehensive feelings about writing or enhanced their existing positive feelings about writing. Lori, Laci, and Andi found the experience rejuvenated their passion for writing, while Holli and Brandi discovered that they were actually pretty good writers. They all felt they would be better writing teachers for having actually experienced the writing
process. Grossman, Smagorinsky, and Valencia (1999) emphasize the need for teachers to experience what they want their students to experience prior to implementing such approaches in their classrooms. It is through this type of experience that a person’s self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986) has the potential to increase, which was the case for the participants of this study.

**Engagement in the Community of Practice**

Full membership in a community of practice requires committed engagement. Wenger’s (1998) three levels of participation within a community of practice, core, active, and peripheral, which were described in detail in chapter 2, provided many opportunities for the participants of this study to engage in the community of practice. According to Wenger, et al. the key to quality participation in a community of practice is to provide multiple entry points within each level of participation to allow participants to operate as full members. This keeps the participants who are operating in the periphery connected to the community of practice and creates opportunities for members operating at the active level to move more toward the center of the community to become core members (2002). The participants of this study obviously moved back and forth between the fluid boundaries of membership as their competencies and comfort levels allowed them.

Andi consistently participated within the active level during the invitational summer institute. She felt the professional development provided by her school district was not meeting her needs and desires to use writing effectively in her classroom. For Andi, a major entry point was the fact that she had friends and colleagues who had attended a previous invitational summer institute, so she was aware of the invitational
summer institute structure and what it potentially had to offer. It was easy for her to engage in the invitational summer institute social practices as they reflected and supported many of her own personal beliefs and instructional practices. This gave her the opportunity to focus on her stated purpose for attending the invitational summer institute. She was there to learn more about using writing effectively in her classroom. Andi felt a little intimidated when the invitational summer institute began since she was a relatively new teacher and was certain others knew more about writing and had more experiences than her. Once she realized this was not the case, her confidence and comfort levels began to rise. She quickly began making personal and professional connections with other fellows and the leadership team. Andi realized that she and other fellows shared similar interests, issues, and concerns concerning writing and the teaching of writing, confirming, for her, that she was not alone in her desires and needs to learn more about writing and writing instruction. This allowed her to open up and share personally and professionally, thus allowing her to move toward the core as she became more vested in the learning of others and the community of practice as a whole. Andi was open-minded and invited new ideas and challenging conversations which stimulated her learning and development as a writer and teacher within the community of practice. She learned a great deal about herself and her teaching through the continuous social interactions with others during the invitational summer institute.

Laci’s engagement in the invitational summer institute community of practice was two-fold. She was interested in receiving the six hours of graduate credit as well as learning about and experiencing writing. Laci immediately became an active member of the community of practice because she felt it met her personal, cognitive, and social
needs. She found that she had a great deal in common with other fellows and could open up and be herself. Laci enjoyed writing and embraced having opportunities to actively participate in multiple writing activities on a daily basis, and she found great satisfaction in engaging and working with the diverse teachers and leaders at the invitational summer institute. She felt comfortable sharing her personal teaching practices and learning from others’ practices. Laci flourished, because she could fully participate in the invitational summer institute as an active member, yet at the same time move toward the periphery when she found her comfort and confidence levels waning. She could then immediately return to participating at the active level as she developed trust and confidence, all without interruption to her flow. Laci was committed to openly examining and sharing her teaching practices with others to engage in making meaning. She eagerly absorbed what others had to offer as well. Laci found that many of the experiences and practices of the invitational summer institute paralleled her own teaching which allowed her to engage at a deeper level and remain an active member.

Lori began the invitational summer institute as a member operating in the periphery, as Wenger (1998) claims most members do. Being a social studies teacher, she assumed she would not have anything to offer the language arts and English teachers at a workshop for writing. Lori attended the invitational summer institute to improve her personal writing not her teaching. Lori, like Andi, had an insider’s advantage because she knew a teacher consultant from a previous National Writing Project invitational summer institute. This allowed her to have the advantage of somewhat knowing what would take place during the invitational summer institute. She quickly found that she had a great deal in common with other fellows and made
connections across content areas and grade levels. As a motivated learner and
achiever, Lori became interested in and enrolled in graduate school shortly after
beginning the invitational summer institute which would allow her to take advantage of
the free six hours of graduate credit. Any doubts or apprehensions about her
competences as a writer or teacher quickly disappeared as she moved away from the
periphery and began to operate as an active member of the community of practice. Lori
found that differing views and perspectives challenged her to be more reflective and
investigative in her own learning and teaching. Her open-mindedness welcomed new
ideas and strategies which she applied to her personal writing and classroom
instruction. Lori found that the invitational summer institute environment and core
leadership team supported and fostered her refinement as a writer and teacher. For
Lori, the social practices and asset-based environment enabled her to grow in her
personal writing and supported her growth as a teacher. This allowed her to fully
engage as an active member of the community of practice.

Holli, a fourth grade writing/social studies teacher, attended the invitational
summer institute to gain more writing instruction knowledge. Although eager to learn
more about writing, other components of the invitational summer institute caused her to
be apprehensive and anxious. Having been out of school for a number of years, she
claimed that the research paper occupied much of her time and concentration. This was
a source of stress for her. She fully participated in the invitational summer institute, but
spent much of her time, in the beginning, operating in the periphery of the community of
practice getting reacquainted with research skills and focusing on her research paper.
As she moved through the flow of activities and routines on a daily basis, Holli moved
fluidly between the peripheral and active levels of membership as she made personal and professional connections thus benefiting her personal writing and writing instruction. As Holli became more comfortable with the research process and learned that she had the freedom to choose how to present the final product, many of her anxieties diminished thus allowing her to focus her energy and attention in other directions. Holli became very close with her table mates further boosting her confidence and comfort levels and allowing her to engage in the community of practice more as an active member.

Brandi, a Kindergarten teacher, attended the invitational summer institute, first, for the six hours of graduate credit and secondly to improve her teaching. Brandi reported having a positive experience at the invitational summer institute and gained many teaching ideas that she felt could be adapted and implemented in her classroom. Her closest relationships were formed with her table mates, and those fellows who taught similar grade levels to what she did. Although Brandi participated in the daily activities and routines fully, she operated most of the time within the periphery of the invitational summer institute. She felt she had very little to offer other teachers because of her lack of teaching experience and because she taught Kindergarten. She was eager to gain knowledge from others and began to see, as the invitational summer institute progressed, how the knowledge she obtained was beneficial to her teaching and the needs of her students. Brandi found the asset-based environment and atmosphere engaging and aligned with her teaching beliefs, thus allowing her to feel more comfortable and open up to share some of her practices and writing. Brandi never allowed herself to open up completely to share as much as she felt others did. She
found much of the writing that others shared during the invitational summer institute too personal, and she was not ready or committed enough to share at that level. Again, this caused her to operate within the periphery of the invitational summer institute as she watched and learned from others operating at a more active level. Brandi, however, was able to engage at a more active level during the teaching demonstrations because these matched her personal learning and teaching styles. She eagerly participated in the experiential learning with the intent of learning more about how to support writing in her Kindergarten class. She was pleased and excited as she realized that many of the activities and lessons could be adapted and utilized in her classroom. One of Brandi’s main commitments was to her research paper. She felt this was very important because she intended it to become the focus of her master’s thesis in her program. She actively engaged in this pursuit and found it both informative and rewarding. The research paper, for Brandi, was largely an individual endeavor, but she sought help from the core leadership team and more knowledgeable fellows in narrowing her focus, obtaining resources, and guidance. Brandi valued having the opportunity to self-direct her research, again as it was to guide her master’s program. Brandi reported that overall she had a very positive experience during the invitational summer institute, gained confidence and competence in her teaching, and developed close friendships.

The participants in this study clearly participated within the community of practice at multiple levels and to varying degrees. According to Wenger (1998) participation in this manner is vital to the life and success of a community of practice and the learning which takes place within a community of practice. It is the notion of being able to engage where, how, and when one is capable that generates the capability to learn with
and from each other. Those participating at the core have just as much to learn from those participating within the periphery of the community of practice. It is the fluidity between levels of participation that allows members of a community of practice to share their knowledge and experience when needed and to take in others’ experiences and knowledge when presented (Wenger, 1998). There is little to no emphasis on a hierarchy of knowledge. Members of a community practice bring with them their experiences and beliefs and share those with each other for the purpose of benefitting everyone. Everyone has something to offer and something to gain. This is what Wenger (1998) believes, and I agree, makes a community of practice so empowering and meaningful. The members come together with prior experiences and share what knowledge they possess and in turn construct the collective knowledge or the shared repertoire among all members.

*Differences that Made a Difference for Participants*

In looking at the findings of this study, it is important to highlight the differences that made a difference for the participants in order to obtain a complete view of the complex and interwoven themes. The National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institutes are built on diversity and bringing this diversity together to build a successful community of practice (Lieberman & Wood, 2003; NWP, 2009). While these participants came together to improve their writing and instructional practices, they also brought with them past experiences, goals, interests, and needs. These differences sat them apart from each and provided the necessary tensions that allowed them to bond with each other and form their unique identity within the community of practice (Wenger, 1998). These differences influenced their ability to engage and participate within the
community of practice of the invitational summer institute. This section briefly highlights each participant’s differences in connection with the five themes that were revealed in the findings.

Andi attended the invitational summer institute to learn about writing and to enhance her writing instruction. She entered the invitational summer institute as a reflective practitioner (Schon, 1983). She was actively examining what had worked and what was not working in her classroom. Along with this, she had a deep knowledge base about writing and writing instruction, because she was a motivated learner, self-professed writer, and high school English teacher who had received extensive content instruction during her teacher training program. For Andi, relationships were the difference that made a difference. She learned about and became involved with this particular National Writing Project site because she taught with two teacher consultants who recognized her desire to learn about writing and her frustration with a lack of applicable professional development in her school district. These teachers provided the entry point for Andi’s participation. Andi entered the invitational summer institute with relationships already in place, a good idea of what to expect during the experience, and a fairly high confidence level concerning her knowledge. This allowed her to quickly begin participating at the active level of the community of practice and remain at this level for most of the duration of the invitational summer institute. Andi benefitted from the shared knowledge base and has implemented many strategies and techniques gained at the invitational summer institute into her classroom instruction. She has remains an active member of the community of practice and often moves into a core position as she participates as a leader for this local site.
Similar to Andi, the difference that made a difference for Lori was relationships. Lori also knew a teacher consultant who recommended that she participate in a writing group that was sponsored by this National Writing Project site. Upon visiting the writing group, Lori found a group of interesting learners and desired to get to know them better. Lori decided to attend the invitational summer institute to improve her personal writing despite being a social studies teacher and not an English teacher. Unlike Andi, Lori had very little writing content knowledge and was not quite sure how writing would fit into her teaching. She had tried to use writing in her classroom, and it did not work. Lori saw value in personal writing and appreciated its ability to preserve history. Once in the invitational summer institute, Lori found that she had a great deal to learn and a lot to share. The relationships coupled with the asset-based environment provided Lori with a path to the active level of participation. As she participated and developed her competence, she moved back and forth between the periphery and active levels of participation. Taking ownership for her learning also made a difference for Lori. She entered the invitational summer institute non-degree seeking but quickly entered the master’s program. She possessed great confidence in directing her learning during the institute and continued to self-direct her learning after the completion of the institute. Lori has since earned her master’s degree in curriculum and instruction with a minor in reading. Lori remains a member of this National Writing Project site and operates in the periphery, participating occasionally, but keeps in contact with many of her fellow teacher consultants.

Laci, a confident elementary teacher, openly admitted that she possessed an apathetic stance towards professional development prior to her participation in the
invitational summer institute. She is a motivated learner and has goals and aspirations to move into an administration role in curriculum and instruction within her district. She reported that, for the most part, past professional development experiences had lacked the ability to engage her in the process of learning and provided little in the way of applicability for her classroom. Since she anticipated that the Invitational Summer Institute might not be a positive experience, the characteristics that proved to make a difference for her were experiential learning, ownership and autonomy, and the asset-based environment. Experiential learning provided opportunities for Laci to gain ideas, lessons and strategies that had proven to be successful in someone else’s class. These ideas were applicable and provided something tangible that she could take back and utilize in her classroom. Having the opportunity to actually participate in the learning process allowed Laci to truly understand how the lesson should work and why she should use it with her own students. She gained valuable experience and expertise through this process. The asset-based environment made a difference for Laci because her prior professional development experiences did not respect her expertise, nor did they value her experiences. During the invitational summer institute, she found the asset-based environment to be accepting, engaging, and valued what she had to offer. She felt respected as a knowledgeable member of the community and saw the leadership team as role models she wanted to emulate in her school and classroom. She believed the leadership team’s intentional planning and implementation of routines and activities met her personal and professional needs. The characteristic of ownership and autonomy proved to be a powerful difference for Laci as well. Again, past experiences had tainted her perception of participating in professional development.
Discovering that she was encouraged to take ownership of her own learning allowed Laci to be herself and pursue her interests and needs and to focus on how to use what she was learning in her own classroom. This was a powerful experience for her as she reported that the invitational summer institute was one of the first times she really believe that she obtained useful and valuable knowledge from a professional development experience. She also believed that she had found a network of learners who she could rely on and stay connected with. Laci still participates in this National Writing Project site and has pursued various leadership roles within her district.

For Holli, the experiences of the invitational summer institute change her as much as it did her instruction. Ownership and autonomy proved to be the characteristic that made the most difference for her. Holli entered the invitational summer institute uncertain what would be expected of her as far as research and assignments go. She did not feel confident about her ability to accomplish the graduate work and was even more insecure about what she thought she had to offer the community. She was interested in gaining knowledge about writing and was use to having control in her classroom. She worked within a very teacher-driven paradigm. Holli entered the invitational summer institute community of practice through the periphery, as most members do (Wenger, 1998), and remained in the periphery as she struggled to shift her thinking from teacher-driven instruction to learner-driven instruction. Once she accepted the idea that she was in control of her own learning and the direction that her learning would take during this professional development experience, she began to move toward the active level of participation. This shift in thinking opened her up to the whole experience of learning within the institute and with the fellows. She was able to
move back and forth between the active and periphery levels of participation and engagement depending on her confidence and competence in conjunction with the specific activity she was engaged in. Holli found that she had a great deal of experience and expertise to offer others and at the same time gained a great deal of insight and understanding from the collective knowledge developed during the invitational summer institute. These experiences validated many of her beliefs and provided opportunities to experience what her students had been asked to do – write. Holli became a writer during the invitational summer institute because she wrote. She felt she would be a much more effective teacher when she returned to her class. Holli has gone on to pursue a master’s degree in library science and credits her ability to do so to her participation in the invitational summer institute. Holli also maintains an active leadership role on her campus. She stays connected to this National Writing Project site through the periphery and participates in activities when she can.

For Brandi, the invitational summer institute, for the most part, was outside her comfort zone. Brandi entered the community of practice through the periphery and remained there throughout most of the invitational summer institute. The characteristic that made the most difference for Brandi was socially constructed knowledge and practices. Brandi felt most comfortable when she was participating in hands-on learning, because that is what she does with her students. She attended the institute to gain writing ideas to use in her Kindergarten class. The socially constructed knowledge and practices proved to be something tangible that she could adapt and use in her teaching. She felt this was where her time was most productively spent. Brandi spent much of her time in the periphery absorbing the community way (Wenger, 1998), trying to figure out
where she fit in, gathering ideas for her teaching, and working on her research project. She found writing and sharing to be too personal and only allowed herself to participate in writing at a surface level. Relationships proved to be important, but again only on a surface level as she only made connects with a few people. After the completion of the invitational summer institute, Brandi continued to stay connected to the community of practice for required meetings. She has not been involved with the National Writing Project site since then.

The five characteristics identified in this study, ownership and autonomy, relationships, socially constructed practices, asset-based environment, and experiential learning have shown to be the differences that make a difference for the participants of this study. It is through these differences that we see how participants benefit and learn within the community of practice. These differences allowed the participants to find their unique identity within the invitational summer institute and form their collective identity (Wenger, 1998).

Implications

This research study, while limited in scope, is meaningful and informative on many levels and contributes to the discussion on communities of practice as well as teacher professional development. Specifically, this study has implications for designers, directors, and facilitators of National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institutes as well as others wishing to foster communities of practice within their organizations, schools, or classrooms. Recommendations for further research are also presented.
Consistently, the participants of this study reported their experiences in the community of practice within National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute as positive, engaging, applicable, and empowering. In a time of high stakes accountability and a demand for highly qualified teachers (NCLB, 2001), it is imperative that we listen to the voices of the consumers of professional development – teachers. By better understanding the characteristics of communities of practice as revealed by the participants of this study we can better plan for and implement successful professional development opportunities for teachers.

Teachers have often been considered passive consumers of knowledge when it comes to their professional development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; Little, 1993). The findings of this study stand in sharp contrast to that generalization and support utilizing a community of practice approach as a successful form of effective professional development. While communities of practice cannot be designed, but designed for, the National Writing Project has shown to effectively utilize Wenger’s (1998) concept of a community of practice to meet the needs of its participants. However, the characteristics of communities of practice revealed by the perceptions and experiences of the participants in this study go beyond Wenger’s (1998) characteristics of the community of practice and provide a rich description of the community of practice within an invitational summer institute. This study identifies five characteristics of a community of practice that are not seen in the business world. The findings of this study suggest utilizing these characteristics of communities of practice when designing and implementing teacher professional development as well as communities of practice in schools and classrooms. These characteristics have the
potential to have the same positive effects, as they did in this study, in professional
development and classrooms. If we could follow students, who have experienced
learning with National Writing Project teachers utilizing these characteristics, over an
extended period of time we would see positive effects on their learning.

As we plan for and implement professional development utilizing the identified
characteristics of communities of practice in this study, it is important to keep the learner
in mind. Learners do not come to a learning situation void of experiences and expertise
(Lave & Wenger, 1991; Knowles, 1990). Their knowledge and experiences must be
valued, utilized, and shared to benefit their learning as well as the learning of others.
According to Knowles (1990) adults are more likely to engage in a learning situation
when they can self-direct their learning. What are needed are more learning
opportunities where adult learners have control and choice over what and how they
experience learning. Teachers need to experience ownership and autonomy within a
community of practice. This can be done by encouraging participants to actively reflect
on their teaching. Through this reflective process teachers are able better to identify the
needs of their students thus empowering teachers to take action in their classrooms and
meet the needs of their students.

We expect our students to be actively engaged in learning, yet we sit in
professional development that does not meet our needs or actively engage us in the
learning process. As we utilize communities of practice, according to the findings of this
study, we must be cognizant of the fact that teachers come to professional development
with varying experiences and levels of knowledge and be prepared to help these
teachers actively engage to the fullest extent possible to benefit their learning as well as
the learning of their students. Understanding Wenger’s levels of engagement and building a shared body of knowledge will enable and enhance participants’ engagement and learning within the community of practice (1998). In the case of the invitational summer institute, because diversity is a key tenant to successful knowledge building (Lieberman, 2007; NWP, 2008, 2009; Wenger, 1998), it is important that we build a foundation of shared knowledge about writing and writing instruction. This can be effectively accomplished by providing foundational reading pieces which include theory, practice, and the history of writing, as well as the National Writing Project to the fellows prior to entering the invitational summer institute. By having this foundational body of knowledge, we level the playing field so to speak. We insure that each member has some understanding of the domain (Wenger, 1998) of the community of practice which will allow them to begin to form meaningful relationships and engage in socially constructed meaning making. Having the foundational body of knowledge will allow facilitators to better identify where the fellows are within the levels of engagement and to identify participants’ differences as assets within the asset-based environment so that their personal and professional needs and interests can be met. This is supported by Wenger’s (1998) notion that communities of practice must invite diverse thinking and ideas in order to successfully function and develop a shared repertoire of resources from which the community will benefit. This is also applicable for classrooms. As students enter the classroom, they come with diverse experiences, different levels of knowledge, and multiple learning styles. It is important to build a foundational body of knowledge where everyone is learning something new. By providing the opportunity for everyone to learn something new together at the beginning of the year, whether it is
something from science, social studies or even poetry, students and teachers will be able to effectively engage in the new learning within the community of practice they are building. They will form meaningful relationships, engage in socially constructed knowledge, take ownership of their learning while experiencing the learning firsthand within an asset-based environment, and their differences will be seen as assets that will enhance their learning as well as the learning of their fellow classmates. Teachers will be able to better identify where students are learning within the levels of engagement and better scaffold and move students toward the core of the community of practice.

Data in this study suggest that relationships are important to teacher engagement and success in professional development. Learning is a social process (Lave, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) therefore, learners must be given opportunities to cultivate relationships and have productive interactions with others. This takes time and effort. Collective and collaborative learning are foundational beliefs and components of the National Writing Project model. In this model, teachers are brought together to teach and learn from each other (Lieberman & Wood, 2003; Gray, 2000). Relationships can be cultivated and fostered through planned activities, community building activities, and through time provided for informal interactions at the beginning of as well as throughout the duration of professional development programs. The more participants spend time working together and sharing with each other, the more connections they will make, thus having the potential to build strong and often lasting working relationships and networking opportunities. The professional development provided by the National Writing Project is an asset-based model that meets teacher needs and supports them in meeting the needs of their students. Working and learning within a community of
practice is a process and takes time. It is not a “one-shot” learning opportunity. Participants must feel accepted and comfortable in order to honestly share the personal and professional experiences. Participating in an asset-based environment builds trust and reduces isolation which allows the fellows of the invitational summer institute to share their experiences and expertise, take risks, and form relationships.

Having the opportunity to socially construct knowledge and practices, as shown in the data, is an important need in professional development. Since learning is a social activity (Lave, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) and teachers have a wealth of experiences, it stands to reason that teachers should share that wealth of knowledge and experience with other teachers. This, a core belief of the National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute, is not a component found in deficit model professional development (Chaney, 2004; Gray, 2000; Hicks, 1997; Lieberman, 2007). Teachers sharing their personal and professional experiences present prime opportunities for experiential learning to occur. The data revealed that “learning by doing” was a powerful mode of instruction which fostered the development of empathy for what students experience and allowed the participants to internalize the learning. In professional development, experiential learning goes beyond simply engaging the participants in the full activities that they are to utilize in their classrooms. Experiential learning provides opportunities, when situated in asset-based environments, to provide meaning making which is socially constructed and shared among the community of practice. This proved to be powerful, for the participants of this study, in the sense that participants actually understood how the learning took place and felt that they could adapt and utilize the activities and strategies within their own classrooms and felt confident and supported in
their knowledge. This is in strong contrast to the “sit and get” and “show and tell” methods often associated with traditional or deficit models of professional development which proves to be one of the most sited factors for non-engagement in professional development (Tate, 2004). By having the opportunity to experience learning firsthand, teachers understand why they need to use the activities they experience in their classrooms.

Just as we want to avoid “one-shot” doses of professional development, we want to ensure that students receive more than “one-shot” experiences with effective teachers. Utilizing the characteristics of a community of practice, as identified in this study, to build vertical team communities of practice in schools will benefit students. Teachers will have opportunities to work collaboratively across grade levels sharing their practices and expertise in conjunction with grade level curriculum to better meet the needs of the students. Sayler, Thyfault, and Curran (2002) report that utilizing vertical team approaches to planning and implementing instruction not only benefitted teacher moral and reduced feelings isolation, but also helped “build community in the school” (p. 209).

The business world has long been taking advantage of communities of practice. It is widely understood and accepted that knowledge is not static, and nowhere is this more evident than in the rapidly changing business world. According to Wenger, et al. (2002) “Knowledge has become the key to success … Companies need to understand precisely what knowledge will give them a competitive edge” (p. 6). Communities of practice have proven to be a successful means for stewarding knowledge (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). Wenger’s characteristics of a community of practice, mutual
engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire, have served the business world well. These characteristics have helped businesses and organizations understand the importance of social learning within the context of their larger organizations and that knowledge is cultivated when interested and invested members share their experiences and expertise. It is through sharing the knowledge of lived experiences, specifically tacit knowledge that learning occurs (Wenger et al., 2002). Communities of practice provide the informal interactions necessary for tacit knowledge to be shared for the benefit of the collective whole (Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002). Communities of practice enable businesses and organizations to operate more effectively, retain valued talent, and maintain a competitive edge in a world of vast and rapidly changing knowledge.

The five characteristics of a community of practice identified in this study, ownership and autonomy, relationships, asset-based environment, socially constructed knowledge and practices, and experiential learning, have the potential to have the same impact on the field of education that Wenger’s community of practice characteristics have had in the business world. By fostering communities of practice as effective forms of professional development which hold teacher experiences and expertise as valued commodities that must be shared, encourage teachers to take ownership of their learning, and provide opportunities to experience learning firsthand in asset-based environments, we will engage teachers more effectively and at a deeper level in ongoing professional development. The intent of professional development is to improve teachers’ professional competence, keep them current of new strategies and practices, and ultimately improve the learning and success of their students (Guskey, 2003; Speck & Knipe, 2005). Professional development needs to go beyond improving competence,
presenting the new practices, and improving student performance. Professional
development must make a difference in the lives of teachers. We know that the five
characteristics identified in this study individually and collectively make a difference in
the classroom. Encouraging students to take ownership of their learning by giving them
choice in their learning (Graves, 1994; Rogoff, Turkanis & Bartlett, 2003) empowers
them and improves their learning and retention. Providing time and space for students
to engage in interactions and to build relationships with their peers through collaborative
learning activities invites cooperation, challenging conversations, promotes tolerance
and acceptance, and allows students to share and build on their personal experiences,
and mediates learning (Holmes & Meyeroff, 1999; Houser & Frymier, 2009; Rogoff et
al., 2003). Establishing an asset-based environment that values students as effective
learners, understands and meets their varied learning styles, encourages curiosity,
recognizes and values students’ talents, and makes learning meaningful and engaging
(Henson, 2003) opens learning up to everyone in the classroom. By supporting and
encouraging students to share their personal experiences and knowledge, we generate
powerful opportunities to build collective knowledge and develop critical thinking skills
among students (Rogoff et al., 2003). Through sharing what one knows and has
experienced, students have the potential to engage in collaborative scaffolding, thus
enhancing the learning and development of all in the learning situation (Gillies, 2006).
Learning in the classroom is definitely a process of constructing knowledge among
learners (Cazden, 1983). Students learn much more than simply what each other knows
from sharing, they begin to develop tolerance, understanding, empathy, acceptance,
and make connections with others they might not have otherwise be able to make.
Experiencing learning in the classroom firsthand is far more engaging, effective, and rewarding than telling and lecturing (Breunig, 2005; Estes, 2004). By engaging students in experiential learning we make learning in the classroom applicable to the real world. We give students the opportunity to actually understand that what they are learning does apply and is vital to their success later in life (Breunig, 2005; Rogoff et al., 2003). Experiential learning makes learning meaningful. Through utilizing the five characteristics identified in this study, as effective professional development within the context of communities of practice, we will make a difference for teachers. By making a difference for teachers, we will make a difference for students which will make a difference for the individual and that will result in making a difference for student learning.

Educators make decisions and choices everyday regarding their learning and those decisions impact their students learning. Teachers will not seek out and commit to professional development unless they see value and applicability for it in their lives and their classrooms. It is imperative that we foster the development and use of communities of practice as effective forms of professional development so that teachers will in turn foster and utilize communities of practice with their colleagues and students. If we cannot engage teachers in learning via effective professional development, then how can we expect teachers to engage their students in learning within the classroom?

Future Research

As indicated in Chapter 1, communities of practice are everywhere, and we engage in them every day without even realizing it (Wenger, 1998). While the literature is replete with studies focused on communities of practice within the business world,
more studies are needed in education which place teacher experiences and voices at the forefront of the conversation in the literature on communities of practice. Longitudinal studies focused on teacher engagement in effective professional development in the form of communities of practice would provide opportunities to examine teachers’ experiences. Researchers could examine teachers prior to entering the community of practice, during their engagement and participation in the community of practice, and then follow them back into their classrooms to look at the effects of participating in a community of practice on instruction and the levels of implementation and how this affects the learning and knowledge construction in their classrooms. It is also important to examine what tools these teachers and their students are developing that further mediate their learning in their communities of practice.

Longitudinal studies are also warranted to investigate student learning in the classrooms of National Writing Project teachers. By looking at student engagement within Wenger’s (1998) levels of engagement, we can gain a better understanding of how, when, and to what degree students are engaged in learning. Because students enter the classroom with different experiences, abilities, and interests, it is important to be able to identify their levels of engagement within the core, active, and peripheral levels (Wenger, 1998) of the community of practice so that we can better assist them in moving from the periphery to the core of their community of practice and meet their individual and collective learning needs which will ultimately result in improved student achievement.

In light of this study, further investigation is needed surrounding the capacity building and retention of members in the National Writing Project local sites. Utilizing the
levels of engagement to investigate participants’ engagement and participation has the potential to provide insight and understanding of participants’ propensity, ability, and motivation to engage in the community of practice and what causes them to remain engaged or to leave the community of practice. These studies would allow site directors and facilitators to better plan for and implement future invitational summer institutes and continuity events.

Conclusion

The purpose of this naturalistic, descriptive case study was to describe and better understand the characteristics of a community of practice as revealed by the perceptions and experiences of five participants who participated in a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute. Overall, the data reveal that these participants had a positive and successful experience while participating in the invitational summer institute. Five themes emerged which describe and provide a better understanding of the characteristics of a community of practice and align with Wenger’s (1998) necessary dimensions for the existence of a community of practice, yet go beyond Wenger’s (1998) characteristics of a community of practice to provide a rich description of what a community of practice looks like in the arena of teacher professional development.

As this last paragraph draws this dissertation to a close, it is by far not an ending. It is a beginning filled with new questions and directions concerning my interests in communities of practice, the National Writing Project, and the invitational summer institute. Through this recursive process of reading, writing, reflecting, and constructing knowledge, I have grown more interested in understanding the engagement of participants and sustaining their participation in communities of practice. I intend to
follow this investigative path as I feel it is important to the teaching profession. I close now, not with a grand statement, but defer to Andi allowing her words to sum up the experience of participating in a National Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute community of practice.

We came together to focus on writing and learning to teach writing better, but we gained so much more. We became a family. A family who care about each other, who respect and value each other, who learn from each other, and who support each other. We are a community of practice and that has made all the difference in world. We are better learners and teachers because of this experience. (AW/Reflective Statement/78-90/6/29/06)
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE
Tell about your experience in the Summer Institute. (General question to get the conversation started)

1. Talk about your experience of community building during the Summer Institute.

2. Talk about the writing/writing activities you did during the Summer Institute.

3. What attributes (incidents, people, activities, structure) of the Summer Institute stand out for you?

4. What feelings were generated by the Summer Institute?

5. What do you value most from the Summer Institute experience?

6. How did your experience in the Summer Institute affect you? Personally?
   Professionally?

7. Would you like to share anything else relevant to your experience in the Summer Institute or the Summer Institute in general?

(Adapted from Moustakas, 1994, p. 117)
APPENDIX C

WEEKLY SCHEDULE
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday/June 5</th>
<th>Tuesday/June 6</th>
<th>Wednesday/June 7</th>
<th>Thursday/June 8</th>
<th>Friday/June 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kick off the summer institute</td>
<td>Daily Log Author’s Chair</td>
<td>Daily Log Author’s chair</td>
<td>Daily Log Author’s Chair</td>
<td>Daily Log Author’s Chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:00 – 11:30 Writing with a Purpose workshop - Bruce Ballenger</td>
<td>8:30 – 10:00 Community Building Memory Bag Share</td>
<td>Denton ISD Computer Workshop</td>
<td>Writing Workshop Theoretical Framework Facilitator – L. Weston</td>
<td>Leading up to Inquiry “Wonderings” Facilitator – E. Preston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:15 – 12:00 Writing</td>
<td>11:15 – 12:00 Writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>11:30 – 1:00 Lunch on own</strong></td>
<td>Lunch 12:00 – 12:30</td>
<td>Lunch 12:00 – 12:30</td>
<td>Lunch 12:00 – 12:30</td>
<td>Lunch together On the Denton Square</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1:00 – 4:00 More time with Bruce Ballenger</strong></td>
<td>Read Aloud ********– I Am Writer’s Notebook Writing Ah ha’s</td>
<td>Read Aloud Coach - ******** Digital Storytelling Ah ha’s</td>
<td>Read Aloud TC – ******** Reflective Writing Ah ha’s</td>
<td>Writing Marathon 1:00 – 3:00 Meet at Beth Marie’s Ice Cream Parlor at 3:00 for dessert and Writing share</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*indicates where a teaching consultant, coach, assistant director, or other member or participant’s name would be. This was for confidentiality reasons.
Unit of Analysis = Utterance
This is defined as that part of continuous spoken language by one speaker that relates to one event or a series of connected events. One utterance could either end with the cessation of talk by the speaker or by the change of subject within the continuous talk.

Data Analysis Codes

Mutual Engagement (MUT) - A sense of shared purpose that brings members together to work toward the same or similar goals, use a shared knowledge base, and whose meanings they negotiate together (Wenger, 1998). Mutual engagement defines the community.

- **Engaged diversity** (eng div) - Bringing different perspectives, experiences, expertise, points of view, and prior knowledge to the community. This diversity can be publicly displayed, stated, or not.
  Examples:  
  (1) “we had different ideas because we were all very different people” (LD452).
  (2) “Everyone brought something different, different perspectives, different experiences, different thinking, different ideas” (AW104).

- **Sharing** (shar) - An act of participating in, use of, enjoying, or experiencing with another or others. This could be knowledge, experiences, writing, beliefs, etc.
  Examples:  
  (1) “Sharing was powerful. I shared about my mother and she shared about the baby she had lost. Her sharing things like that it was just emotional. For that to get shared on the very first day and everybody to embrace that, you know it just set a tone” (HG177).
  (2) “Everyone’s willingness to share not just knowledge and
teaching, but the personal and emotional things allowed use to get
closer, to get deeper” (AW80).

- **Relationships** (rela) – Interpersonal connections with others. These
relationships could represent positive, friendly, tensions, and/or conflicts.
Examples: (1) “I felt very connected with NJ in the beginning having felt the
same kind of emotion, personal loss and experiences. We were
very different but still were able to build a strong relationship”
(AW233).
(2) “I was able to form different relationships. I had my table. We
were very close. We shared the same sense of humor. I had my
response group. They provided great feedback. We were honest
with each other. There were just so many relationships” (BC269)

- **Community Maintenance** (com main) – Taking care of the community.
Helping to build and sustain the community (food, helping others, supporting
each other, providing resources).
Examples: (1) “It was just this - we knew we were all in it together and that
we were doing the same or similar things. We just helped each
other, supported each other. We were a part of each other’s work
and writing” (BC145).
(2) “…we sat down ground rules for how we were going to treat
ourselves, sort of a social contract...this is the framework that we
are going to work in, this is why you are going to be able to feel safe, because these are the rules” (LB337).

**Joint Enterprise** (JE) – The negotiated conditions, resources, and demands that shape the practice. What it [ISI] is about.

- **Negotiated Enterprise** (neg ent) – “Not everybody believes in the same thing or agrees with everything, but that it is communally negotiated” (Wenger, 1998, p.78).

  Examples:  (1) “It was about teachers teaching teachers. There were no hidden agendas. We were allowed to give direction. Everyone’s opinion mattered, and we didn’t necessary have to think or believe in the same things. It was about respect. You know - what we wanted to learn and do. (AW61).

  (2) “Everyone had different things to offer and it did not matter if we all exactly agreed on everything. It was about the writing. That is what our common purpose was. We were there to do writing, learn to write and to learn to teach writing better” (LD58).

- **Mutual Accountability** (mut acc) – A possible set of rules, standards, policies, expectations, and/or goals that whether spoken or not that negotiated the appropriateness of what they do.

  Examples:  (1) “There is just an unspoken kid of, I don’t know, it was almost like umm, I guess and it was an unspoken acknowledgement
between us that what was said was confidential. We would not betray that confidence. We trusted each other” (AW104).

(2) “We sat down and we were like how do we want to treat each other and what are the procedures for this? This is the framework that we are going to work in. This is why you are going to be able to feel safe, because these are the rules” (LB339).

• **Rhythm** (rhy) – A source of coordination, of sense-making, of mutual engagement. The flow of the community.

Examples: (1) It was natural, you know. It just seemed like we had been doing it [ISI] forever” (BC88).

(2) We just seemed to follow into step with each other, as a group. It was like no other PD I have experienced. It was like we had worked together and knew each other for a lot longer than a month” (HG61).

• **Negotiated Responses** (neg res) – Their understanding of their enterprise and its effects in their lives. Taking ownership of learning. What is in it for me?

Examples: (1) “I saw different areas in my literacy development where I felt confused, disappointed, or enlightened even. That also started a whole new conversation in my mind and my burning question for the ISI. I saw where it was that I really felt lost, and I could see what this experience had to offer me” (AW177).
“I was more or less going in [the ISI] for my personal reasons. I wanted to see how I was as a writer. I needed to find that in me. See if it was there. I needed to be a writer for me and for my students. That allowed me to give back to the group. To understand what it was all about” (LB98)

**Shared Repertoire (SHREP)** - Communal resources that members of the community develop over time.

- **Styles (sty)** - Individual or collective ways of doing things and/or adapting shared knowledge to make it your own. A quality of individuality expressed in one’s actions and tastes.

  Examples:  
  (1) “The daily log was amazing. Not only did it capture what we were doing every day, it was a format for creativity. This is the time when our differences and creativity really shined” (BC141).
  (2) “The demonstrations – oh those were powerful. Demonstrations were things I could take back into my classroom and make them my own. Even when they were elementary, I could find something in them that I could tweak and make my own” (AW129).

- **Stories (stor)** - An account or a recital of an event or series of events. An incident, experience or subject that furnishes interest, experience, or connection to or for someone.

  Examples:  
  (1) “It was really good because we shared our experiences from our classrooms, whether they were good or bad experiences, and
no one was afraid to share. We all wanted to hear those because we had similar things happen to us” (LD32).

(2) “The literacy life map was one of my favorite pieces. When I laid that all out in front of me, I could look back and see my literacy story. That started a whole new conversation in my heard (AW173).

- **Artifacts** (art) - Anything developed during the ISI that could be left for others to see, use, and for members of the community to make meaning from.

  Example:  
  (1) “Read Arounds were enjoyable because you could see where people took their ideas and how they evolved” (AW128).
  (2) “The anthology with all of our writing really summed up who we were and who we had become during that month” (BC43).

- **Actions** (act) - A behavior or conduct of a community member, effect or influence on or by a community member.

  Example:  
  (1) “We didn’t talk very much, but we communicated mostly through notes. It was just that gesture and acknowledgment that we understood what each other had gone through” (AW231).
  (2) “This whole experience, the writing project, the people, the leaders, it all changed the way that I look at anything: staff development, education, writing, me” (LD43).

- **Tools** (tool) - Devises used in the performance of work or that which facilitates work or the result of work (i.e. new ideas, demonstrations, research).
Examples:  (1) “I hadn’t written anything for me personally at all since I was in high school. My writer’s notebook became very important to me. I knew I could write anytime I wanted. That was really fun because I could play around with writing again” (LD99).

(2) “[Demonstration lessons] I was finally learning something that I could just take immediately into the classroom or that we could see teachers that are already using some of this stuff. I was thinking how could I apply and tweak this to social studies?” (LB80).

• **Discourse** (disc) – Ways in which members discuss their work and other forms of communication.

Examples:  (1) “Even though we had many different experiences in teaching, we quickly developed a common language. The leaders were instrumental in that. They introduce NWP terminology to us and it all just made sense. (BC41).

(2) “Before the institute, I did not know many writing people and didn’t have a good foundation, but this [ISI] really opened my eyes and the research was really big because it helped me communicate with the group” (LD78).

• **Historical Events** (he) – events that represent an important moment in time for the community.

Examples:  (1) “The Bruce Ballenger workshop was important. It gave us common ground. We started the summer institute with that in
common. It was a great way to get started. We began to build our community there” (HG451).

(2) “I loved when we went on the field trip to the square. That was fun because it gave us another opportunity to learn more about each other away from the summer institute (BC59).
REFERENCES


