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Caring for a Network of Teacher-Writers in a Time of Covid

Write across America: The virtual writing marathon

Kel Sassi^a, Richard Louth^b and Susan Martens^c

Abstract

Three U.S. writing project teachers from Louisiana, Missouri, and North Dakota reflect on their experiences with the National Writing Project's writing marathon and discuss their collaboration to design, implement, and study a virtual writing marathon during the coronavirus pandemic. Interspersed with teachers' writing from the marathon, the piece explains the features of the design and ends with four primary conclusions: 1) Writing should be at the center of our pedagogy, 2) A writing marathon can and should be adapted for online spaces, 3) Virtual writing marathons have lasting value, and 4) The success of the Virtual Writing Marathon rests on National Writing Project infrastructure and culture.

KEYWORDS: WRITING MARATHON, COMMUNITY, ONLINE, EXPRESSIVE WRITING

I Am a Writer (Ann Naito Haney, 2021)

When I was a kid, I thought that writers just wrote books. It was a simple thought – but unedited for many years until writing became important to me and I found it a fluid thing to be a writer. When writing is going good, it feels like I am ice skating in my mind. Other times I am taking a shovel and a pickaxe to a frozen piece of ground hoping to find a particular word or phrase to talk about what is going on – I take a break and lean against a tree, and a bird flies by with a full vocabulary landing on my knee. We talk a while and then I find myself connected to the entire world. I find that writing is sort of like jumping into a river while not knowing how deep it is. Writing is just making visible the lifelong conversation you are having in your head. It is my other me.

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Introduction

We begin with the words of Ann Naito Haney, a retired Maryland art teacher and writer who participated in the National Writing Project's 2020 Write Across America. The title of her piece, 'I Am a Writer,' reflects one of the tenets of the National Writing Project (NWP): to teach writing, we should be writers (Gooda, 2016). Haney's writing also reflects an underlying concept for conducting and participating in writing marathons: identifying oneself as a writer is crucial to one being a writer. In our article, we describe how the writing identity of Ann and others like her was affirmed through the NWP's 2020 Write Across America, which was a virtual writing marathon program that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and continues as a program model bringing together teachers, writers, and community members from across the country to write, reflect, and build connection around place, history, and storytelling. The Write Across America program yielded key insights about writing pedagogy in online spaces and about the value of writing marathons as a pedagogical tool. In telling the story of this virtual writing program, we showcase participant writing, explain the origin and functions of writing marathons within the context of the National Writing Project, and reflect on lessons we learned as planners and participants of this event during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond.

In the spring of 2020, the reality of the coronavirus pandemic hit hard – the number of Covid-19 cases was spiking, teachers were suddenly shifting to online instruction, and most of us were canceling travel plans. As a result, NWP site leaders were making difficult decisions about whether to cancel or postpone summer institutes, workshops, and conferences; others were quickly redesigning spring and summer in-person professional development programs for K-College teachers of writing and youth for online delivery. The biggest questions on our minds were: How could we still support the teaching of writing, build community at our writing project sites, and experience some of the rejuvenation that travel offers teachers? At this pivotal time, a core group of NWP leaders from across the country, including the three authors of this article, turned to the longstanding NWP tradition of the writing marathon to connect and support teachers, through writing, during an unprecedented traumatic time for teachers. We wondered about hosting such work in online spaces and if we could create a national writing marathon program to bring NWP sites together, support teachers, and build connection and community.

Origins of the Writing Marathon

The concept of the writing marathon originated with a chapter entitled ‘Writing Marathons’ in Natalie Goldberg’s 1986 book, *Writing Down the Bones*. Goldberg shares the story of writers sitting around a table writing spontaneously to prompts pulled from a box in a 4-hour marathon session. In 1994, Richard Louth, the Director of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project, riffed on Goldberg’s model when he took the concept of the writing marathon to the streets in the first ‘New Orleans Writing Marathon’ (NOWM). Writers walked the streets of the city, stopping at historical landmarks and everyday places, to write spontaneously, inspired by the sights and sounds around them. The basic writing marathon model has these three characteristics:

1. participants identify themselves as writers and write primarily for themselves;
2. writers work in small groups, moving across a landscape, from place to place, over a period of time;
3. groups agree to write, to voluntarily share their writing with no critical response, to simply say ‘thank you’ after each person reads, and to talk, socialize, and move on after each round of writing and reading. (Louth, 2011, p. ix)

NWP sites from around the state sent their K-University teacher leaders to New Orleans for day-long writing marathons led by Richard Louth. Teachers from writing project sites around the country started flying to New Orleans each year for the writing marathon to experience the exploration of place-based writing in this historic city with other teachers of writing. The writing marathon as a practice and tool for teaching and experiencing writing spread across the network of sites. The NWP instituted writing marathons in two ways: 1) through its New Director retreats and 2) at its annual meetings for writing project directors and teacher leaders from across the country. The latter were held every November a day before the National Council of Teachers Annual Convention in locations around the country. In 2006, shortly after Hurricane Katrina, the first known virtual writing marathon occurred when NWP teacher-writers from across the country were invited to remotely join SLWP writers on the ground in the devastated French Quarter by emailing their own writing from across the country. Individual sites began including their own writing marathons as part of their summer institutes. In the last 25 years, tens of thousands of teachers have experienced some form of writing marathon.

Write Across America, the latest iteration of the writing marathon, in one way or another, emphasized that the participants were a community of

writers. Participants often commented on how what they wrote surprised them, and how they felt free to take risks. At the final stop, fittingly, back in New Orleans, where writing marathons originated, all participants wrote their first piece on the prompt, 'I'm a writer'. Not surprisingly while everyone was given a common prompt, the differences in all the participating individuals kept responses fresh. In the spirit of the sharing that occurs in a typical writing marathon, we will stop from time to time in this article and share writing of participants from Write Across America. Several representative pieces – from non-NWP writers (such as Ann Naito Haney, Gay DiGiovanni, and Bob Shullaw) as well as NWP teacher leaders (such as Mark Dziedzic, Laura Frost, Ben Melby, and Margaret Simon) – are featured in this article.

Gay DiGiovanni has attended the New Orleans writing marathon in person several times, and was inspired by the StoryMap (discussed below) to write the following:

The Taste of New Orleans (Gay DiGiovanni, 2021)

Summer in New Orleans is like spicy food. Of course, the initial heat makes the timid shy away. The practical, logical, planning people think of all the consequences beforehand. The daring dive in. 'Let's try it!'

Moving past the sweltering heat is the wonder and surprise of something not quite tangible. Quizzical, magical, not yet clear. Take another taste, perhaps chase it with cool white wine.

What is that flavor? It's something familiar but mixed with other things. The combination stumps me. Like something new and fresh mixed with old world scenes. I try to separate the tone, the colors, and smells. Hmmm, I will have to come back for another taste. Again, and again, until I really taste New Orleans.

'How the New Orleans Writing Marathon Put a Spell on Me'

Like many teachers in the NWP, Kel Sassi first experienced a writing marathon at her site's summer institute. When she became director of the Red River Valley Writing Project in North Dakota, she enthusiastically kept the tradition going and even supported a stand-alone writing marathon developed by Teacher Consultants Kim Rensch, Angela Hase, Andrea Noonan, and Sara Kram. That writing marathon, dubbed Pens and Pints, started at independent bookstore Zandbrosz at the north end of walkable downtown Fargo, North Dakota and ended at the Red Raven coffee house at the south end, where participants took to a small stage to share one of their pieces of writing. In between, participating bars, restaurants, and cafes offered writer-themed drinks and prompts. Kel recognized the power of the writing marathon to build community among the Summer Institute

participants, many of whom taught in isolated, rural North Dakota schools. Furthermore, it reinforced the principle that to be a teacher of writing, one must actively write (Gray, 2000; Kittle, 2008).

With Pens and Pints, Kel saw that it was not only writing project teachers who benefited. The public event drew teachers who had not previously been involved with the Red River Valley Writing Project, and it also drew in community members. At the time, the National Writing Project was conducting a grant-funded project called 'New Pathways to Leadership', and Kel recognized the potential of the writing marathon to be one of the new pathways into the writing project and also the power to connect writing project teachers with the larger community, especially with diverse community members.

The writing marathon also allowed participants to connect with place and with the place-based writing traditions of the NWP, such as the range of classroom, community, and professional development programs documented by Robbins and Dyer (2004) as well as practices uniquely aligned to address specific types of places, such as rural and suburban contexts (Brooke, 2003, 2015). For example, rural teachers in North Dakota, unless they teach on or near an American Indian reservation, teach in classrooms comprised of predominantly white people. However, North Dakota has the highest per capita number of refugees, most from war torn countries in Africa. This New American population is highly concentrated in Fargo. Another unique demographic feature of North Dakota is that the largest non-white group is Native Americans (primarily Dakota, Lakota, Ojibwe, or one of the Three Affiliated Tribes), many of whom live in Fargo. This means that rural teachers on a writing marathon may be eating fufu at the Liberian cafe, tasting knoephla soup (a food brought over by German settlers), or having conversations with Native Americans on the streets of downtown Fargo, which are place-based experiences quite different from those in their small towns.

Beyond this, Kel found writing marathons somewhat magical, transcending the sum of their parts and evoking a kind of excitement and interest not seen with other aspects of the site's programming. Teachers saw these events as an escape, adventure, or exploration rather than professional development or work-related. When travel with the NWP brought Kel to New Orleans in 2019, she contacted Richard Louth to request a night-time writing marathon for the NWP's College, Career, and Community Writers team. After a day-long workshop, Kel and other NWP teacher leaders ventured out onto the streets of New Orleans, notebooks in hand. Soon, she found herself under the spell of the writing marathon, writing at a rooftop bar while flocks of starlings murmured against a purple-blue sky. As writers shared their first round of writing, Kel began to think that perhaps it

is the interconnectedness that becomes manifest when writing in public places and engaging with other writers and community members that is part of the magic of writing marathons. After another round of writing, two groups merged into one group of 12 and began to seek a place to eat dinner for their last round of writing and sharing. Richard Louth wondered how such a large group could possibly find a table that large without reservations in New Orleans on a Friday night. Magically, a place called Little Ed's waved the group in. Soon they were eating mussels and jambalaya and reading the last round of writing together.

A year later, all of us would think back to memories like this one as our lives changed radically during the Coronavirus pandemic.

Planning and Leading Write Across America

In the spring of 2020, as the Covid-19 pandemic was unfolding, a group of seven writing project sites (Greater Madison, Central Arizona, South Mississippi, Morehead, Red River Valley, Hudson Valley, Minnesota, and New Hampshire) brainstormed in a breakout room as part of an NWP 'Connecting the Network' Zoom meeting about how to deal with canceled summer institutes, stressed out teachers, and a call from our national director to make the NWP more visible and accessible. Kel Sassi proposed a virtual writing marathon as a possible solution, and the group eagerly began developing a vision for a national Virtual Writing Marathon (VWM), building on the 'face-to-face' model presented by the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project's New Orleans Writing Marathon. The group of eight, plus Susan Martens, who had written her dissertation on the writing marathon, developed this set of goals:

1. Connect the NWP network and our wider set of colleagues through the simple act of writing together in community.
2. Provide an opportunity for participants to 'travel' in the time of Coronavirus and participate in a community of writers.
3. Learn about different places through writing.
4. Raise the collective visibility of the NWP network and our commitment to writing.
5. Collect shareable resources for teachers to take their students on a virtual writing marathon in the fall.

Kel organized follow-up meetings to bring this vision to fruition in little over a month. We decided that our virtual marathon participants would meet in Zoom for 75 minutes, writing and sharing in a few rounds without comment to a small group of fellow writers while also learning a bit

about the landscape and history of the places where each hosting NWP was located. According to the NWP's information and registration page for Write Across America, participants would experience 'an orientation by the local site to a place in their region or, perhaps, to a new conception of virtual space. Each stop on the itinerary will provide inspiration, time to write, time to share, and a sense of community' (National Writing Project, 2020). NWP Director, Elyse Eidman-Adahl, and NWP staff, such as Luke Hokama, a web designer, helped Kel with publicizing the marathon, creating an online space for the calendar and resources, and providing other support as needed. The NWP allowed use of their Zoom account for the marathon stops.

2020 Summer Itinerary

Next stops on the marathon will take you North/South/East and West. Participation is free, but registering in advance helps the host site plan.

All visits are scheduled at 2:00-3:15pm PT / 3:00-4:15pm MT / 4:00-5:15pm CT / 5:00-6:15 ET

Date	Site
June 16	Madison Greater Madison Writing Project (WI)
June 23	Central Arizona Writing Project (AZ)
June 30	South Mississippi Writing Project (MS) – Share Your Writing Site
July 7	Morehead Writing Project (KY)
July 14	Red River Valley Writing Project (ND)
July 21	Hudson Valley Writing Project (NY)
July 28	Minnesota Writing Project (MN)
August 4	New Hampshire Writing Project (NH)
August 11	Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project (LA) (100min)

Figure 1. The Stops on the 2020 Write Across America

Although every site followed the basic structure explained on the website – orientation to place, inspiration, time to write, time to share writing aloud in randomly assigned breakout rooms of 3–5 people – individual sites modified how much time was spent on each part of this and/or how they designed each part of the experience. This approach was possible because of the structure of the National Writing Project itself – a balance between local site knowledge and needs combined with a mechanism for national collaboration. The resulting event was christened ‘Write Across America,’ birthed from the Covid-19 pandemic – with necessity as the mother of invention.

In June 2020, the Writing Marathon or first ‘stop’ on Write Across America launched in Madison, Wisconsin, with nine additional weekly stops throughout the summer, every Tuesday from 4–5:30pm Central Time. The full itinerary covered multiple regions in the United States (see Figure 1).

Participants wrote in virtual locations such as Wisconsin’s lush botanical gardens, Arizona’s tall canyons, an outdoor Hudson Valley Art Center, and Minnesota’s George Floyd Memorial. Fittingly, the final ‘stop’ was in New Orleans at the writing project site where the writing marathon originated. Over the course of this 9-week VWM, more than 400 people participated (with 40–80 at each stop), most (but not all) being NWP K-college teacher-writers of a variety of ages, and an astonishing quantity and variety of writing was produced and shared, such as this piece by Bob Shullaw, a regular retiree and non-NWP attendee (relative of a TC) who has since become a regular facilitator and attended every VWM session since the beginning.

Ocean (Bob Shullaw, 2021)

*The water before me a storm torn prairie.
Bleak, rippling, waving, thrashing, rain lashed
Tornado green above and below.
Horizonless, endless
Spindrift thrown like a billion billion grass seeds across the air.
My fading wake the only compass.*

The day after each stop on the marathon, the group met to debrief and review the exit tickets. In so doing, we were able to be responsive to participant needs and make changes as the summer went on. These meetings also gave the site leaders who were hosting the next stop a chance to ask questions, get additional support (like breakout room leaders), and share their ideas. One of the ideas shared was the use of StoryMap.

Virtual Space for Writers: StoryMapJS

During the planning stages of Write Across America 2020, Susan Martens introduced the digital mapping tool StoryMapJS to the leadership team as a possible way to ground participants in the natural, cultural, and historical landscapes of their physical locations. StoryMapJS is an online tool that allows participants to click on a map, opening a window at right that includes text and images. Susan had first learned about StoryMapJS's potential from another NWP site director, Troy Hicks (2018), and had used it to create interactive maps for writing spots at the New Orleans Writing Marathon Retreat in 2019 and for the virtual writing marathon at the 2020 Tennessee Williams Literary Festival. Many of the 2020 Write Across America host sites went on to use StoryMaps for their stops, making use of the tool's format of side-by-side maps and slides with customizable space for sharing photos, links, embedded videos, and writing prompts (see Figure 2). The use of StoryMaps helped lend a strong sense of travel to the stops and added to a feeling of continuity for the program overall.

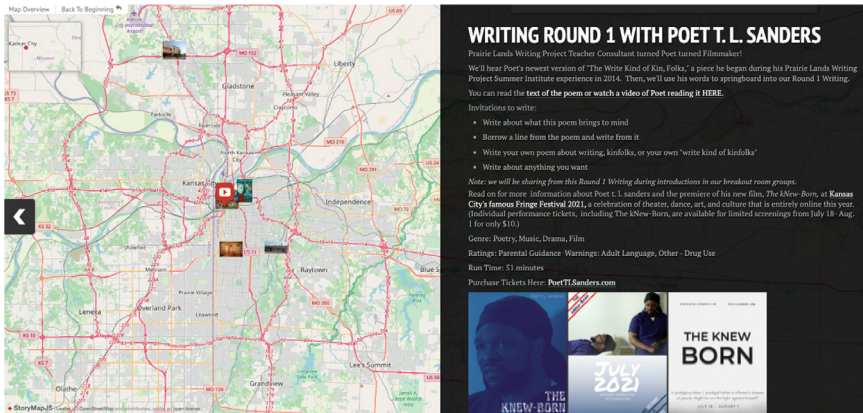


Figure 2. Screenshot of a Page from the Prairie Lands Writing Project StoryMap

As the 2021's Write Across America marathon rolled on across the nation, it became clear that we had a thriving, efficient model that was not only sustaining 2020's momentum but allowing sites to continually adapt and improve the model, as is customary in the NWP. Furthermore, many of the locations and prompts gave participants an opportunity to write about issues of race, which was particularly essential after the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police.

By 2022, Write Across America was transcending its origin as a temporary pandemic response and becoming a regular part of NWP's programming. Kel continued to work as the main organizer of the event and found

that a single planning meeting, combined with the skills already present among the NWP network and a thinking partner who had previous experience hosting a stop, was sufficient to launch and sustain the writing marathon each summer. This planning meeting relied on a key planning document with links to the accumulated resources (see Figure 3).

Write Across America

Planning Meeting Agenda

While we are gathering together on Zoom, please make sure all the folks who should be receiving emails about this are on this contact list:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Gmqgd_bY_DUpZRFQACyLRt9yRAM8wFIOFJEft9M7vU/edit

- 1) Introductions. Let's go through in the order of the calendar. Introduce yourself and share a hope, wish, or inquiry for your work on Write Across America
- 2) [Overview](#) of Write Across America
- 3) Any changes to our NWP web page? <https://www.nwp.org/write-across-america>
- 4) Write Now [Teacher Studio](#) as a place for this team; use of badges
Here is the link to join: https://studio.nwp.org/share/HKqDd23hy-Tk6le8?utm_source=manual
- 5) Nuts and bolts of individual site planning:
 - [A couple weeks before](#): Plan out your stop with your team. If you wish, create a [story map](#) or other online method of creating a sense of place. Decide on your invitation to write. Line up breakout room facilitators (about 35% of registrants have volunteered to serve). Reach out to us, your planning team, if you think you might need help.
 - [A few days before](#): Check the [registration form](#) and send out a reminder to everyone about your stop. Include links to your story map, or place artifact, if you think people might want to familiarize themselves with it ahead of time.
 - [The day before](#): Send out the [Zoom link](#) provided by the National Writing Project
 - [The day of](#): meet with breakout room leaders a few minutes early to go over the [breakout room protocol](#).
 - use a version of the [model agenda](#) or other guide for participants
 - Ask folks to fill out the [exit slip](#). If you use a different exit slip, please share it with us.
 - [The day after](#): meet to debrief how it went with the next stop's team; last year we met on Wednesdays at 2pm ET, 1pm CT, noon MT, 11am PT. Link to join debrief meeting:
- 6) Inquiry questions and writing about WAAM (Kel)
- 7) Thinking partner time—we'll get into breakout rooms, so you can meet with your thinking partner to plan your stop on the writing marathon
- 8) Concluding—final Q & A

Figure 3. Primary Planning Document Used to Launch Write Across America

The Importance of Cynicism and Criticism

After the leadership team had designed and launched Write Across America, Richard Louth, the founder of the New Orleans Writing Marathon, had to be dragged screaming and kicking into the 2020 Write for America Virtual Writing Marathon (VWM). Before March 13, 2020, he had been a university classroom teacher who enjoyed writing alongside students in a physical space and the spontaneity of sharing his work aloud with them. On beautiful days, he would take students outside and do a

somewhat traditional writing marathon with them on campus – allowing them to form small groups, find a comfortable space at an outdoor table, and write/share together on prompts that he would provide. In true NWP fashion, Richard tried to put writing ‘at the center’ of his pedagogy however he could (Gray, 2000).

But when the pandemic hit and all classes suddenly became virtual, Richard struggled (as did many teachers). His natural resistance to teaching through technology was compounded by the fact that he did not have internet at home, the school was technically closed, and he had to do most work – creating assignments, grading, linking to the university online system – over a smart phone. By the end of that spring 2020 semester, he was exhausted, wanted a break from technology, and needed time away from education.

So, he said, ‘No,’ when invited to contribute to the 2020 Write for America Virtual Marathon. Luckily, Kel and Susan, who were instrumental to the planning team, gave him time to change his mind, which he eventually did. After all, Zoom or not, it was going to be a writing marathon, and as Richard had created the original model for the NWP writing marathon (Louth, 2002), he was dedicated to the writing marathon concept and wanted to see how it could be translated from ‘face-to-face’ to virtual.

Write Across America provided a model based on freedom/discipline to ensure success and continuity, and that model seemed organic, not imposed – two forces that Alfred North Whitehead (1929) sees as underlying good teaching in *The Aims of Education*. So, while most stops were 75 minutes long, each stop spent that time differently. Almost all used StoryMapJS to provide a sense of common virtual space, but while some were quite complex and seemed to be the primary focus of the stop, in other cases the StoryMaps were simple and secondary. Writing and sharing and the construction of groups were all part of the model, but again, there were significant differences over the course of 10 stops. Every Write Across America stop seemed fresh and original, yet at the same time not so different that participants were thrown off.

When site leaders met in a debrief session after each stop to critically examine participants’ exit slips and discuss what should be changed for the next stop, they were always asking the question ‘Why?’ For example – Why give ‘prompts’ on the StoryMap? Why have a common ‘grounding’ activity at the beginning? Why post the protocol for sharing? Why have two or three rounds of writing? Why have a closing activity? In addressing critical questions like these, it was essential to have Richard Louth on the leadership team to guide this critical inquiry.

Building on Success: Write Across America 2021

Building on the success of the 2020 VWM, Kel led the first meeting of the 2021 leadership team on April 1, 2021. Twelve sites each signed up for a stop, to be held again each Tuesday from May 25 to August 10. Hosts from the 2020 VWM each signed up to be a thinking partner for one of the new hosts. At the group meeting, attendees discussed the general guidelines for how to plan for each of our stops.

New host site leaders met in breakout rooms with their thinking partners, talking through questions about how to recreate the experience in the virtual format. Many also attended the first stop on the 2021 VWM, which helped those new to virtual writing marathons understand the basic framework and start to visualize how their own stops might work. The 2021 host sites had the benefit of being able to look back at each of the 2020 host sites' materials, including the basic agenda for each Write Across America stop that had evolved through that summer:

- An opening/welcome session
- An orientation to the place-based materials, such as a StoryMap, and breakout room sharing protocol
- Time for writers to write, share, and talk, in 2–4 rounds
- A closing activity with a brief invitation from the following week's host site

Each site was encouraged to use the basic agenda, planning timeline, and pedagogy but to adapt the marathon to make it their own. For example, some sites wanted to introduce participants to notable writers in their region. For the North Dakota stop, one of those writers was Louise Erdrich, who, in 2021, inspired Benjamin Melby, a new site director, to write the following.

The World is Not Mine (Ben Melby, 2021)

The Erdrich quote, 'our songs travel the earth...' brings to mind the interconnectedness of life – life at the level of people and cultures, life at the level of nature (biota... living and non-living materiality), and especially life at a level that transcends and embraces all cultures and natures. It is an interconnectedness that is not based in metaphysics or romanticism or groundless sentimentality. This interconnectedness IS the workings of the planet. As all species have arisen from a common ancestor. As our ecologies shape who we are. And as who we are, together, shapes our ecologies. The transcendentalists were onto something: we can touch the ether in the pebbly stream bottoms. Agency and voice are not found in a free-floating consciousness. It is not merely ME, MINE, MYSELF. It is not narrowly personal, self-centered, or egocentric. It is emerging from a shared past, present, and future.

Walking the Talk – Writing Marathon as Collaborative Professional Development

The Prairie Lands Writing Project at Missouri Western State University, directed by Susan Martens, had been using writing marathons as a beloved Summer Institute launch activity for at least a decade. The 2021 Summer Institute, however, was to be entirely virtual – a great opportunity to engage the participants in the 2021 Write Across America. More than a way to help teachers claim their identities as writers and bond with their small writing groups, Susan also wanted this experience to connect them to the NWP network and to gain facilitation experience in NWP-style professional development.

Since she knew teachers would not be able to design and facilitate a virtual writing marathon without participating in one, Susan led one on the opening day of their virtual Summer Institute, using the Ohio Writing Project's StoryMap and basic agenda. In debriefing their virtual writing marathon experience, the PLWP teachers talked about how much they appreciated the way the StoryMap content helped spark writing, how the invitations to write were not worded as typical 'prompts,' and how hearing others' writing in the first round influenced the way they wrote in the second and third rounds. The teachers then brainstormed possible writing locations throughout Missouri and discussed variations on the basic agenda. Each Summer Institute participant (including the three site leaders) then took the next week to design their own writing spot on the Missouri StoryMap, including a description, links to resources, and two invitations to write. While the other Summer Institute activities unfolded, Susan continued attending Write Across America stops, gaining inspiration and expanding the possibilities for PLWP's stop each time. At the University of California-Irvine stop immediately preceding Prairie Lands', she gave a quick preview of the Missouri StoryMap her site was developing. She also corresponded with her thinking partner from the Write Across America leadership team, Greater Madison Writing Project Director Mark Dziedzic, whose site had hosted the very first Write Across America stop in 2020.

A Time I Feel like I Was at Sea (Mark Dziedzic, 2021)

The feeling of being at sea, like so many other things in life, is the holding onto two simultaneously contradictory truths. Much as I am here in this moment with you while I am not with you at all, being at sea is free and constraining. It is awe and horror. Peaceful storms. Enormity and infinitesimal – the sea and self, nothing and everything.

The sea and the world hold these truths. Are they in conflict with one another or are they counter balances? Are they truths or momentary perspectives? When I

stand on the bow of the boat looking out at the infinite horizon of blue am I seeing what is ahead or missing what is behind?

Historic, Hungry, Haunted Missouri – The Prairie Lands Writing Project Stop

During the week before the PLWP stop, Susan coordinated with local performance professional and PLWP Teacher Consultant Poet t.l. sanders, a writing marathon fan, who agreed to perform one of his PLWP-inspired poems for the opening session. The Missouri writing locations the teachers chose were easily arranged into three paths: ‘Historic Missouri’, ‘Hungry Missouri’, and ‘Haunted Missouri’. The locations along these paths provided a wide range of options: tourist destinations like museums and landmarks, restaurants like a BBQ place and a coffeehouse, and sites of local ghost stories, like Saint Louis’s haunted Lemp Mansion. It was important to the site leaders that the map also be inclusive and reflect the region’s diverse heritage, so they chose writing spots that showcased the Black and Indigenous cultures of KC and St. Joseph, including the American Jazz Museum in Kansas City and Saint Joseph’s history as a trading site for the Otoe, Ioway, Sac and Fox, Missouri, and Osage people.

On the evening of the PLWP stop, the teachers were nervous about taking on their new leadership roles but also excited to welcome visitors to their state. In the end, all of the planning and preparation paid off well with a smooth, successful virtual event attended by about 40 writers from all across the country. Exit slip comments noted not just an appreciation for the event’s structure but also praise for the new teacher-leaders: ‘Fabulous flow tonight. Poet kicking us off was perfect. The StoryMap was beautiful and inviting’. Two other comments specifically called out breakout room facilitators, saying, ‘Our young scholar, Kate M. was lovely and did a great job facilitating our group’. Another comment illustrated the supportive nature of the NWP network, with veteran Teacher Consultants from around the country welcoming this new cohort: ‘To the new PLWP TCs – Welcome to the network and thank you for the gift of your site.’

Teaching Teachers – Virtual Writing Marathon as Pedagogy

During her next meeting with the Summer Institute teachers, Susan shared the exit slip feedback and debriefed with them. The teachers shared their feelings of initial hesitancy that gave way to strong feelings of joy, connection, and a great sense of accomplishment. What PLWP’s newest Teacher Consultants gained in the experience was well worth the effort: the deep understanding of writing pedagogy that comes from working with fellow

writers and the deep learning that comes from working with fellow educators in a vibrant community of practice (Crandall, 2019; Gooda, 2016; Peary, 2014; Shah, 2018).

Even though the impetus for this learning came because of the pandemic and the virtual format, the facilitators agreed that it was one of the best things to happen in the whole Summer Institute, beneficial enough to replicate in the future no matter which modality is used. Susan believes that the virtual marathon experience was a significant factor in the success of the Summer Institute, yielding valuable lessons.

First, the experience confirmed the importance of providing teachers a way to claim and inhabit their identities as writers, ample time to write, and multiple experiences to share their writing with others. Bringing in the newest TCs as co-designers and co-hosts allowed them to embrace the NWP ethos of respecting teacher expertise and collaborating across content areas and grade levels.

Second, the virtual writing marathon engendered a strong sense of belonging and connection for the teachers. They benefited from the experience of connecting with other teacher-writers by exploring virtual places, writing together, and sharing their writing aloud – all as members of the wider NWP network. The virtual writing marathon experience was also an incredible opportunity for the teachers to practice being writing facilitators with a live audience of professional peers. The success they experienced as a group was bonding in and of itself and a countermeasure to the imposter syndrome so common to emerging teacher-leaders. In Teacher Consultant Laura Frost's piece below, one has a sense of how place-based writing has helped her to ground herself in what she knows to be true.

What is the Relationship between Place and Healing? (Laura Frost, 2021)

Stillness, silence, solitude. A time away with my thoughts. Simple meals, simple surroundings. A bed, chair, desk, and Spartan bathroom. Books, journal, woods, and walking shoes.

The pale cerulean summer sky, fanned with feathered cloud, reflected in the glassy lake, studded with geese, loons, fish, and one enormous, enigmatic turtle.

Tramping the trails in mucky mud; crisp, skittering leaves; crystalline shards of ice.

The freedom to be alone. The terrible burden of having nothing to distract you from your own chattering mind.

Solitude crosses into loneliness, then slides back again into serenity and sense – sense in both definitions: the sensations of heat or cold, breeze or stillness, blinding sun's brilliance or thundering rain; but also sense as in returning to the ground of one's being, what is right, what is true, what is known.

Conclusion – Lessons We Learned

1. Writing should be at the center

Writing – even though it is ‘at the center’ of the NWP, will always have to compete for its place in an event and in the classroom. It is easy to give lip service to writing, but then not have much writing occur. In the VWM, writing had to compete against so many other attractions: the introduction of the site; opening activities to create community; StoryMaps; protocols; closing activities; etc. Almost everyone asked for more writing time. It raises the question – in our pedagogy, how much of our ‘teaching’ actually gets in the way of students’ writing? How do we reach an effective balance between the teaching and the writing? What are the factors in our teaching that interfere with creating effective writing environments (grading, supervisors, mandated lessons, our own desire to perform, etc.). The VWM really made us think about writing’s value and place in the VWM as well as in the classroom.

One way we honored writing was by collecting the writings of over 35 individuals and showcasing them online in their own StoryMap as well as in ‘Voices from the 2020 Virtual New Orleans Writing Marathon,’ published in *Louisiana Literature*, which was the seventh consecutive publication of pieces from writing marathons since 2011, and the first to be dedicated to a virtual writing marathon.

2. A Writing Marathon can and should be adapted

Our experience showed us the flexibility of the writing marathon model, how a WM can become a VWM, and what can be lost and gained in the process. Like the NWP itself, the WM is built on a balance between freedom and discipline, which allows it to be adjusted to local needs. Every version of the VWM over the last two years worked, and did so despite their differences, because no matter the place, a genuine effort was made each time to put writing at the center and create a community of writers. It should make site directors as well as teachers ask ‘How else can I adapt a WM to my needs, to a Summer Institute, to a 4th grade classroom, to a 60-minute time period, etc.?’

With the pandemic raging on, Write Across America was repeated in Summer 2021, expanding the virtual marathon to twelve stops, with site leaders from 2020 serving as thinking partners for the 2021 cohort. In addition, the Tennessee Williams Literary Festival in New Orleans held a VWM in 2021 and physical WM in 2022. A version for young people, Teens Write

Across America, was launched in August 2021, drawing over a thousand student writers (Sassi, Martens, & Dawkins, 2022).

3. Virtual Writing Marathons have lasting value

A virtual writing marathon both affirms local sites and transcends place. It connects summer institute participants with the national network and provides professional development for budding teacher leaders. The virtual writing marathon also provides another doorway into the NWP. It has value for individuals and sites involved as well as for the NWP network. Participants consistently reported enjoying each VWM, and many returned week after week to experience the joy of writing in a community of writers as well as for the pleasure of virtually travelling across America – as a writer – during the pandemic. Pleasure can be an underlying force that attracts participants and contributes to a successful and memorable experience. The pleasure of being with other NWP teacher leaders in creating something new was one of the primary forces that caused the Write Across America VWM. Some participants simply wanted the company of others during a pandemic that had isolated everyone. Others wanted to do a writing marathon because they'd done them before or heard about them. Some wanted to see the headwaters of the Mississippi River, the George Floyd monument, or a Bourbon Street nightclub. Some just wanted time to write, which they knew they wouldn't give themselves if at home alone. Even when we collectively suffered from 'Zoom fatigue', people still logged on to Write Across America.

4. The success of the Virtual Writing Marathon rests on NWP infrastructure and culture

We strongly believe that it would not have been possible to create a program like Write Across America if it were not for the infrastructure of the NWP. The nimbleness with which we responded to the pandemic 'lockdown' by going virtual with the writing marathon and opening it up to the whole network is only possible because of the decades of development that came before. For example, the already existing technological infrastructure of NWP's *write.learn.lead* blog, our internal networking site, Teacher Studio, as well as the NWP's sitewide 'Connecting the Network' Zoom meetings, gave us the online space to host the marathon and publicize it across the country. When registration skyrocketed, we were able to use NWP's Zoom account to accommodate more participants. If we had had to build or buy any of these resources ourselves, we would not have been able to launch this program as quickly as we did.

Access to infrastructure is only part of the story, however. We also benefited from the way the NWP shares ideas across the network. The most significant example is, of course, the marathon itself, which has circulated around the national network for over two decades. Other examples include Susan's use of StoryMaps, which she learned about from Troy Hicks, another site director, and Kel's recruitment of thinking partners for new hosts. Lieberman and Wood (2004) have studied National Writing Project culture through their observation of summer institutes. They noted that NWP leaders frequently reference the NWP 'model' or 'the work,' which is actually a pervasive and powerful set of social practices leading to the creation of strong learning communities.' Some of the social practices they identified in their study of summer institutes are also present in our work with the virtual writing marathon:

- Adopting a stance of inquiry
- Approaching every colleague as a potentially valuable contributor
- Rethinking professional identity and linking it to professional community
- Teachers teaching other teachers

Kel and the original leadership team approached the design of the VWM as an inquiry project from the beginning. They generated a list of questions that could be explored throughout the summer. Kel formalized this process by co-writing an Institutional Review Board research proposal, which was approved through her institution. The three authors of this article embarked on a qualitative research project using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) model of grounded theory that involved reading, coding, and analyzing hundreds of exit slips and surveys about the experience of the virtual writing marathon, which led to the development of a theoretical model we called the Virtual Writing Marathon Ecosystem. Our CCC study (Sassi, Martens, & Louth, 2023) broadens concepts of place-based writing, extends previous scholarship on writing marathons, and theorizes a dynamic online ecosystem in which emotion, virtual place, identity, and community interact in the process of writing.

The social practice of approaching every colleague as a potentially valuable contributor was infused throughout the VWM, from open calls for hosting sites, directors like Susan entrusting the design and implementation of their stops to Summer Institute participants, everyone inviting those who wished to step into the breakout room facilitator role, and the listening involved with debrief sessions. There were many experts in the VWM – it truly embodied the NWP social practice of teachers teaching teachers.

We invited participants to rethink their professional identities and adopt the identity of writer. In doing so, we became a professional community of writers. But establishing the community in which one is currently writing shouldn't come at the expense of recognizing the communities one is already a part of. Crandall (2019) asserts, 'Individual writers achieve more when they belong to and are engaged with a larger community of writers that has respect for the many communities to which the individual belongs' (p. 9). Write Across America provided a sense of community in which individual teachers and the places in which they write were respected.

In conclusion, when we put writing at the center of a writing marathon in a spirit of inquiry and build on the social practices of the National Writing Project, a sense of community develops that is somehow magical. It has made us rethink the value of community in writing pedagogy. Margaret Simon, a TC in the NWP of Acadiana, who has helped lead writing marathons herself in Cajun country, and who as an attendee of many NWP sponsored writing marathons, wrote with Richard Louth's group at the very first NOWM in 1994, and she wrote this at her last writing marathon, the VWM of 2020:

Muses (Margaret Simon, 2021)

*Muses have a lost sense of time.
They live in the back of Napoleon's Bar
drinking Pimm's Cups.
I've asked them to visit me
here on the bayou steeped
in cafe au lait brown
buzzing with cicada song.
They come in the long shadows
of a summer afternoon.
or in the fractal face
of a sunflower in bloom.
Muses mock me
with their silver linings,
here then there,
then nowhere,
hiding in plain sight.
Sometimes, I step on them
by mistake.
Give me that mess
again. My pen is waiting.*

About the Authors

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Richard Louth recently retired from 45 years of teaching at Southeastern Louisiana University, where he was a Professor of English and founding Director of the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project. He founded the 'New Orleans Writing Marathon' (NOWM), which became the model for NWP writing marathons, and continues to lead NOWMs of 1–5 days duration.

Susan Martens is Director of the Prairie Lands Writing Project and associate professor of English at Missouri Western State University in Saint Joseph, Missouri. She has been researching writing marathons since 2006 when she went on her first one as a high school English teacher at a National Writing Project retreat. She continues to lead and study them in K-12, college composition, creative writing, English education, and professional development contexts as well as at youth writing and literary festivals.

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