



# Writing Our Way: Narrative Inquiry and a Teaching Writing Life

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*Writing Our Way* was a narrative inquiry that examined the lived experience of six women educators over a two-year period. The project began as a gathering of women interested in discussing their writing and their practice, and grew into a research project, with each of the six women acting as researchers/participants.

## Research Questions

The project began with questions, such as: What does it mean for teachers to learn to teach writing? How do teachers learn to teach writing? How do teachers learn and teach a writing life? These questions gathered the participants' minds for the study and led to one overarching question that guided their research: How does a reflective focus group enable its members to find their individual and collective voices so that they can become more effective teachers of writing?

## Research Methodology

The project used narrative inquiry to analyze and explore data that the participants provided through journal entries, transcriptions of meeting discussions, and e-mail communications. Each of these three methods of

communication served a particular and necessary purpose within the project. However, the journals provided the richest material for data analysis because they represented the truest expression of the participants' thoughts and feelings. A unique feature of the project was the rotating journal. The group maintained six journals for reflection and response. These journals did not belong to any one member. Rather, they were circulated among the participants, allowing each person to use the journal at hand for personal and professional reflection, as well as respond to the thinking of other members of the project. The data from the journals and the other narrative samples collected were analyzed and interpreted to develop understanding of the participants' life experiences in relationship to the research questions.

## Research Findings

Three major themes emerged from the study, each with a number of sub-themes:

- Constructing Identity – interconnectedness, building individual identity, identity within and as a group, conflicting priorities
- The Writing Life – community, journaling, challenges, writing craft, reading and writing
- Linking Theory and Practice – isolation, strategies for teaching writing, constructivist theory and practice, reflective practice

A literature review that was organised to explore the three major themes contributed several new themes relevant to the project: the teaching self, collaboration, women's ways of knowing and change theory.

## Reflections and Recommendations

The participants found that the time needed to engage in narrative inquiry was significant but they also concluded that the project had helped them to evolve as writers and educators. They developed recommendations for building a collaborative support group of teachers, identified areas for further research, and considered their own next steps as educators committed to on-going examination of their practice and their teaching lives.



Cheryl Mantei and Myra Froc participate in reflection and discussion related to the project.